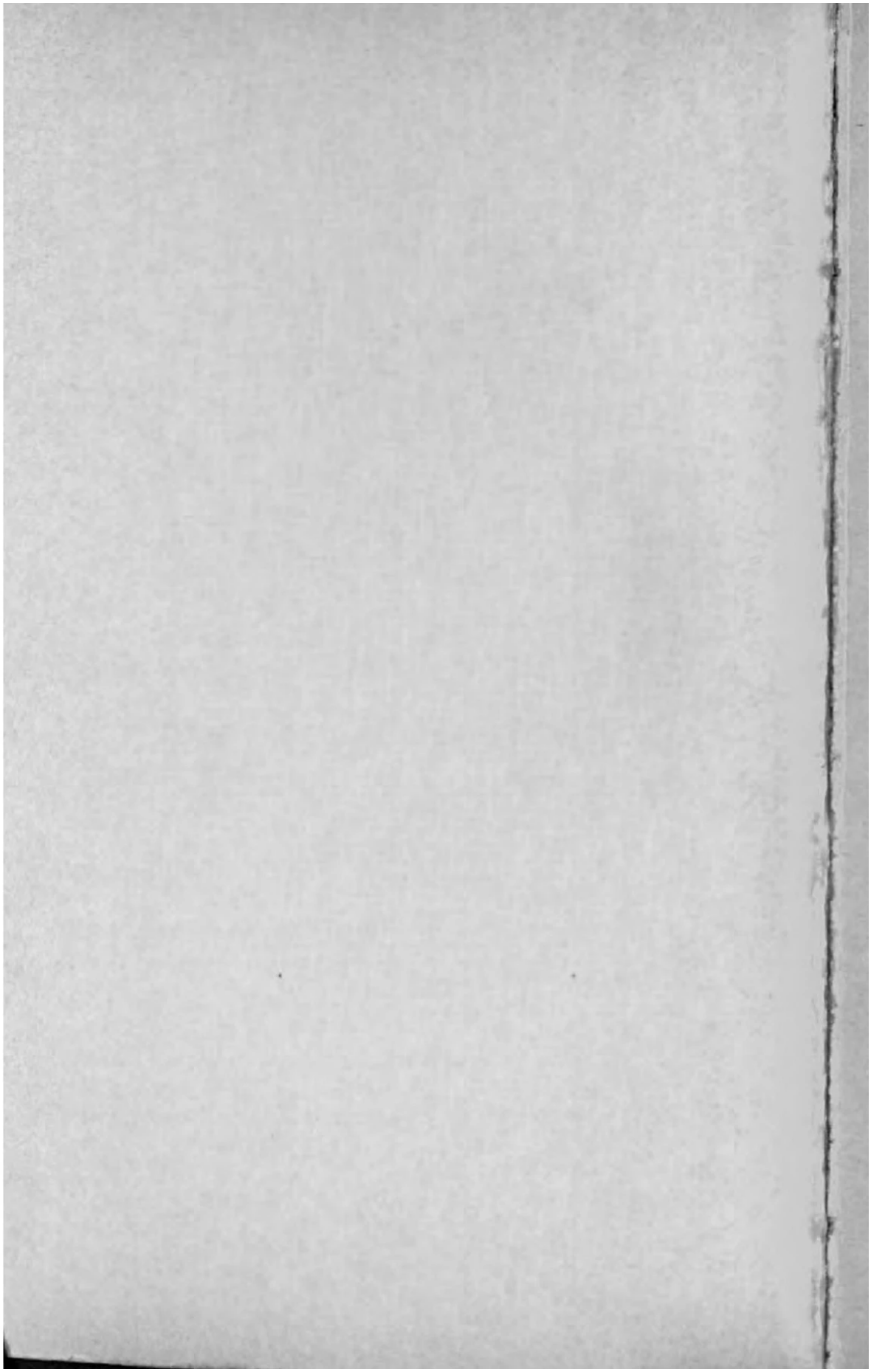
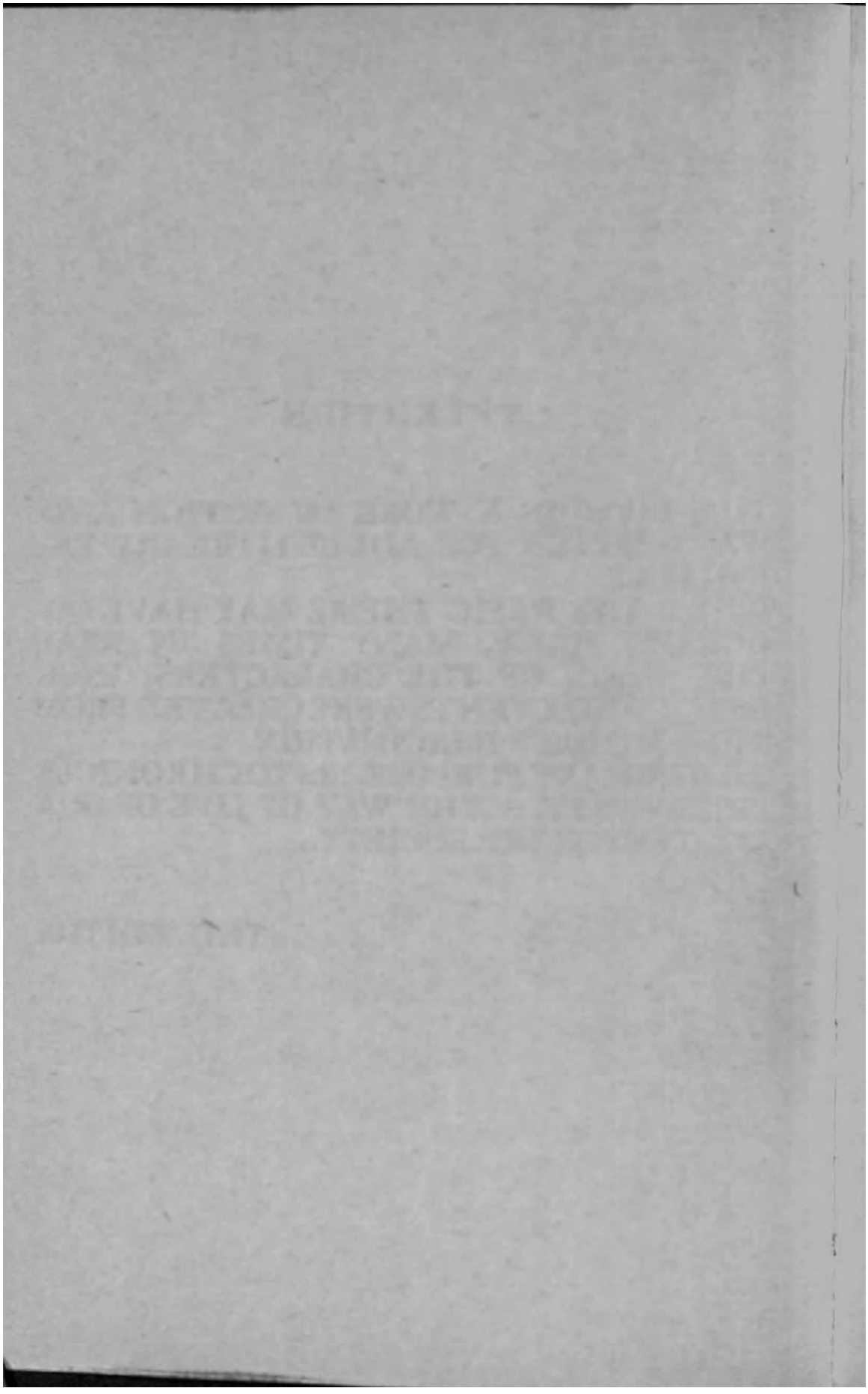

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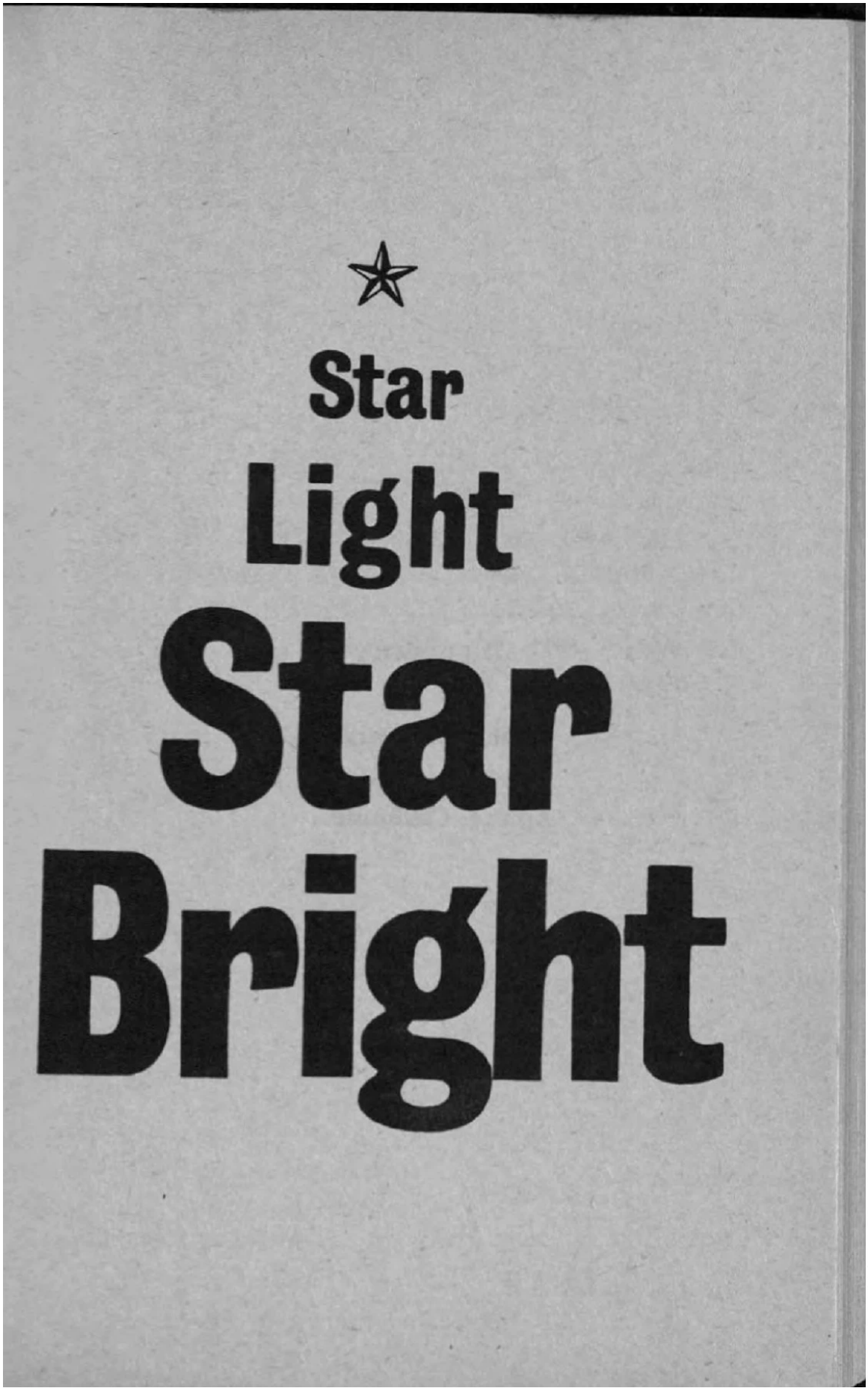


ATTENTION

THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WAS WRITTEN FOR ADULT LITERARY ENJOYMENT.
WHILE THE BASIC THEME MAY HAVE OCCURRED MANY, MANY TIMES IN REAL LIFE. . .ALL OF THE CHARACTERS, INCIDENTS AND EVENTS WERE CREATED FROM THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION.
THE PRIMARY PURPOSE...IS TO CHRONICLE FICTIONALLY. . .THE WAY OF LIFE OF OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.

. . . . .THE EDITOR




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Star
Bright

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Why is life so tragic; so like a little bridge over an abyss. I look down. I feel giddy. I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end.

—The Author

Star light,
Star bright,
wish I may,
wish I might,
have this wish
I wish tonight.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often, it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath, the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. With my characters, it is this mixture in them, of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gives their conduct an unexpected turn.

"Who am I?" they seem to ask. And the reply could be: one, no one, or a hundred thousand. They are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colors have run. They are cut to bits, like pieces of paper blown by the wind, existing no more than the world around them exists. They are floating individuals, atomized in space and putting on, like so many successive garments, the different moments of their personalities. To them, the crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If they press them, all will burst. Imprisoned within their own bodies, forever torn and hesitating between two opposite poles of attraction, they

settle for the tragic view of life. Longing to embrace the whole world with their arms of understanding, but unable to, they withdraw into themselves, beyond the reach of that tyrannical reality which elude their grasp, turning away from life and toward another presence. Passing through all the stages of intellectual mysticism, they are lured into a nithilism which they regard with both fascination and horror. Like the God Janus, they have two faces, one dark and melancholy, the other bright, luminous. This inherent duality, this androgynous condition, has echoes on every level of this work. It forms a kind of inner rhythm.

"We love each other," they say, but with the sadness one feels at the thought of never again being alone.

Why did I write this novel: Some strange ecstasy came over me. Some wild notion I had of following the birds to the rim of the world and flinging myself on the spongy surf and there drinking forgetfulness.

Carl V. Corley

CHAPTER ONE

The Black Lamp! Here is where it all began. And here is where it also ended. Two years of my life—my life, like a child cut from its mother's womb and wanders aimlessly, or like a boat untied from its moorings and drifting out into a shoreless sea, or like a planet flung out up darkness to seek its orbit, so did my own life, my ways, my habits, sought something that heretofore was unknown to me and which I could not always master. A kind of break-a-way from the ordered, scheduled existence which had enslaved my twenty-six years. Yet, even orderlessness has order. And, no matter how abandoned one becomes of rule and principle, nor how one discards clock and calendar and schedule, here is still a pattern to the most undisciplined life. There is a pattern even in anarchy. Motive and rule prevail even in chaos.

And there was chaos in the Black Lamp and there was plenty of motivation, though the flux and influx of its patrons were like a hive of newly disturbed bees, and the least organized person that found refuge from that fugitive world of the outside brought

with him his own self-styled standards and his own brand of honor—so, honor among thieves.

But all that is gone now. The Black Lamp is no more, and its many patrons, its so faithful followers, have scattered like birds that scatter in every direction when a stone is thrown.

Yet, I shall always remember the Black Lamp and most of all its band of society's refugees, who swarmed into those dimly-lit catacombs to pay homage to their creeds. Those sad memories will always be with me, and I hope even in death, if thoughts go beyond that other slope of life.

I will remember always, the first time I saw the Black Lamp. For there was where it began, the key that was to unlock for me a weird kind of happiness, tragedy of a sort, and doom, and though I did not know it then, that tavern, that relic out of hell, was to serve me forever from my old way of life. A life I thought of which my overly strict mother and father had instilled within me and would never change. Yet—looking back on it now—change I did. I, like so many others, became in time the sacrifice upon its nihilistic altar.

I had arrived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, about three in the afternoon of an early spring (the year I decline to mention), and though I was to be interviewed by the state

tourist commission for a mural they wanted painted on the walls of the mezzanine of the state capitol building, I needed badly a drink to whet my courage. I had always hated interviews of any nature, mainly because nothing ever seemed to be accomplished by them and, though I did not drink except on a social basis (a jaded existence indeed), I realized I needed some kind of fortification. In an entirely new city, among total strangers, which is doubly depressing, alone in the world so to speak, embarked upon a new life, remote from the past which I had all too willingly left behind, and far too personal to relate here, I felt as alien as if I had crossed a continent.

At the railway station, I took a cab and queried the drvier about a place one could get a drink between there and the capitol building. He gave me one unrelentless gaze and suggested the Black Lamp Lounge, which he assured me would not be in the least out of my way and added:

'It's the only place in town that has an atmosphere. Whatever you want, they've got it!"

To that last, I did not know what he meant, people or drink, but I held my silence. Yet I wanted to tell him that I wanted nothing, least of all people. I had had an overdose of them. Not that I was bitter. Life for me at twenty six still held some illu-

sions, and that was the way I wanted to keep it. Save something to hate, the same as you save something to love, was the acid tonic my great Aunt had always dished out and it had cured me numerous tmies during the past. For both love and hate are deeply rented passions, horns on the same goat.

The driver let me out in front of a tall stone gray building on Lafayette street, a street with buildings resembling very much certain areas of the French Quarter in New Orleans, with lace work of iron, overhead terraces, and weather beaten shutters, so pale green, they looked like portions of ships brought up from the sea.

The entrance to the Black Lamp was an exact copy, I was to learn later, of the doors of the Venetian palace of Pisani. The side lights were of etched Bohemian glass and framed with hand-wrought ornamental ironwork, all the opulence of the ante bellum era, or what we come to think of opulence of that era. Sometimes, I think it never was. Recalling of the past is an overdramatization of facts, just as the future is the overdramatization of the imagination. But the aged look of the entrance way, despite its rented plaster to reveal the bricks beneath, the stains on the fine etched glass, the iron that was peeling like a sunburned athlete, there was an inviting look, a quaintness which lured my artistic nature and, picking

up my suitcase, I went inside. There was a long cool hallway, damp even in this semi-tropical heat, with a floor of wine colored tile. This opened out onto the lounge itself which to me was enormous, more like the rotunda of a capitol mezzanine than a lounge. Huge urns, dulled with the roughness of their stone and of age, sat here and there, half hidden by rattlesnake fern which draped them in greenish-black frawns, and among these stood life size statues, some in bronze, tarnished like water pails, a number of them copies which I instantly recognized. They merged through the wiry tumbling fern like silent guards and gave to the over all of the vastness, a funeral aspect which was quieting, sombre but pleasantly soothing to nerves strung and pulled by societies great determined war on human emotions. Around the dark walls, black carriage lamps jutted out like prows on a fortilla of ships, and burned like the eyes of dragons, red, green, blue, and amber. The bar lay across the vast expanse of red tile like an anchorage, and was backed by a huge mirror, the largest I have ever seen. Crystal gleamed like jewels on a woman's gown, glasses and goblets stacked into pyramids, each mirroring the carriage lamps and reflecting back a million colored stars in return. The bartender, the only person in the place that I could see, was lost among them,

a lesser star in a galaxy of cold ice-clear brilliance.

I ordered a drink, a screw driver I believe, now I do not remember, and continued to give the place careful scrutiny. The quietness was absolute, save that of the tingling of glass and ice behind the bar, and the trickle of soft music which poured from a small radio at the extremity of the lounge.

"Hot—for early spring," the bartender said lowly, opening the conversation. "But just wait until July and August, or are you going to be here that long?"

"I hope to make this my home," I answered skeptically, too skeptically I suppose, for he turned from the whirl of inverted beverages and stared me down.

"Looking for a job, eh?"

With a calmness that was surprising to me, I told him about my offer, thinking all the while that he thought me some kind of bum, but when I had finished, I noticed that his face had mellowed, and there was interest in his widely set, darkly lashed cornflower blue eyes.

"So, you're a famous artist," he said, leaning on the bar opposite me, his short shirt sleeves exposing hard, bronzed, arms, thick of wrist and a bit overly sinewy for a bartender. "A lot of artists come here from time to time, of which you will get a chance to meet if you so decide to stay in Baton

Rouge. They'll no doubt worry the hell outa you, once they know your international."

"I'm not really famous," I explained, yet I had already had a number of my illustrations sold to leading magazines for story material, and had illustrated one book, Robinson Crusoe, which had sold nationwide. Too, I had painted a number of famous bodybuilders and the paintings had been published in both American and Foreign physical culture magazines. But this I witheld. For really it was nothing to brag about. Though I knew I was good in art, especially the human form, painting alone was not my ultimate goal. I wanted to write and to illustrate what I had written. When I told him this, his interest perked up even more, and his alert eyes were like the crystal which surrounded him, reflecting the reds and blues of the carriage lamps.

"Well—Mr.—eh (Mr. Star I told him) Mr. Star, you're sure going to fit in around here. Everybody who can hold a brush dabbles, even me sometimes, though I must confess, I am neither a Michaelangelo nor a Renoir, and never hope to be, but I admire your profession. My name's Truly." He thrust out his hand.

I shook his hand, but frowned. My skepticism was visible.

He blushed.

"It's not really Truly, its Michael Harper,

but everybody calls me that on account of I used to have the habit of putting truly before everything I said—truly this, truly that, so that now they call me Truly and nothing else."

"I thought perhaps it was because of your honesty or something like that," I said trying to be polite about it. He blushed again.

"Well, that's a new pitch," and he laughed softly. "I've never had honesty pinned to me, but I like that. It's different."

There was silence then, and he busied himself wiping the bar, taking some kind of creative satisfaction in the black shiny marble beneath his shine cloth.

I had a double image of him through the huge mirror so while he worked, I studied his features, realizing as I studied him that the more I looked, the more I pictured him as anything but a tender of a bar. He seemed about my age, perhaps younger. About five feet seven and possessing the body of an athlete. It was obvious he had gone all out for athletics in high school, even college maybe, for that firmness of chest and limb made itself known in his every movement, his every gesture. His hair was the color of ripe wheat, tipped with gold, and hung over his sweaty forehead in a series of ringlets. He was good looking, to say the least. A dominate physical beauty, and the warmness of his nature evidenced

his maleness. Unlike so many bartenders who show slight signs of femininity, he was one I knew instantly who drew patrons to this bar. He gave me a feeling of belongness, which I needed badly, and I ordered another drink, if not of want of courage, then the desire to talk to him a little longer, the feeling that someone existed upon which I could depend, if but for a little while, someone who registered in full, the epitome of his name—Truly.

Through a latticed doorway, for the Black Lamp was at the corner of the block, strode three boys. Rather, they skipped in, their elongated arms fluttering, their fish eyes mobile as marbles. They occupied a table in a far corner where it was dark. They paged Truly.

"Three beers for three dears!" one of them shouted in a high falsetto voice, waving an arm impatiently, the hand with coins between long tapered fingers bent like an easter lily at the wrist.

"Truly—Truly Fair," another one of them cooed. "Hurry, my dear, we're famished. We've walked half way from Thunder Bird beach, had a flat tire on that Rolls Royce of old auntie Maime—bless her rich money making heart—and my make up is running like the Nile!"

"And her tail is twitching like a crocodile's," blated the third, as he gave an a

fectionate pat.

Truly gave me a hurried side-long glance, quickly opened three beers, sat them on a tray, and went over to where they sat. One of them pulled him over the table, his lips close to Truly's ear, and whispered, but obviously loud enough for me to hear.

"Who is that gorgeous number at the bar? He can eat crackers in my bed any old time."

"He doesn't like crackers," I overheard Truly answer.

"And what will you be eating. sister. while he's eating crackers?" one of them cried in a frenzy of laughter.

Their three faces grouped like the fates.

Truly returned to the bar. He came to where I was standing, fingering my half-emptied glass.

"You want another one on me, Star?" he asked sheepishly, his deliberate kindness unnecessary. I nodded.

He fixed another drink and sat it before me.

"For your good luck on your new job," he said, smiling. "Hope like hell you make it. Like for you to stick around (he shot a piercing glance toward the three at the table) don't get to see much of your kind in here, straight I mean. A refreshing change to get to talk to a real man." He thrust a thumb in their direction.

Indifferently, I turned and watched them, though pretending to study an enormous bas-relief, oval shaped, which hung above them. The three were not a novelty to me. I had seen their kind along Pershing Square, and I was neither hardened nor saddened nor enraged by their outward appearances, their deliberate spoken word. I had learned long ago to accept people as they are, and to look for nothing better nor worse about them. They had their kicks, I had mine. And to think that they desired me, I must confess, gave me a certain kind of pleasure. Not that they would. I knew where to draw the line. Look but not touch, that was my motto. As long as they stayed on their side of the fence then I would maintain truce. Talking was not a disease one could catch. Neither was looking. They could eye me as long as they pleased. It cost me nothing, and if they gained a pleasure from looking then—what the harm?

Truly's eyes followed my glance and he mistook it for hostility.

"They're harmless," he whispered in defense. "They come in here all the time. Just have to put up with them. After all, they spend, and they bring in new customers. So —what the hell (he shrugged) I'm here to sell drinks, so why discriminate?"

"It's alright," I said bluntly, turning back to face him. His blue eyes were imploringly

on mine. I knew what he was trying to con-
vey without having to put it into words. He
did not want me to think that he was like
them. Naturally, I did not. But I did not tell
him so.

Our silence then lent him his cue.

"I use to hate the sight of them," he be-
gan, fixing himself a small frosted glass of
beer and leaning toward me. His eyes were
fixed on the bar. "In fact, I even hated this
lounge when my father willed it to me.
When he was alive, I never came in here
except sometimes to get my allowance. But
when he died, I quit out at L.S.U. and took
over the business, quit football, track, law,
everything. After all, there's more money
here than I could ever make practicing law.
When I was in Baton Rouge High my father
wouldn't allow me in here at all. I didn't
know why then, but now I know (he nodded
in their direction). But—after I took over I
learned and quick. But they grow on you.
You can put up with anything to a certain
point. They're alright, up to that certain
point—you know what I mean—and they
leave me alone. But this isn't a gay bar,
Star, not really. It's every man's bar and
lounge, an art colony, I like to think. I hope
you stay in Baton Rouge. You could write
the All-American epic about this place."

He laughed then, and the shy honesty that
came into his eyes made me laugh too.

"It certainly has the atmosphere for a novel," I added.

Whether it was my sense of loneliness, my quest for a new job, my sudden lostness in a new city, that terrible lostness I always found and deplored among strangers I do not know. At that moment, seeing and, rather, feeling these things about this place, the honest affection of Truly behind the bar, the mirth of the three in the dark corner, their wanting me and the pride of not wanting them, stole over my heart like a gentle hand and I too wanted to remain.

Truly had voiced my desires, and awakened those desires within me, and closed something over my loneliness, something suddenly vital and elastic, and I had the old sensation that I had come home.

However casual he had spoken, however unintentional had been his request that I stay in this Southern city, his soft voice had shaken me from my sleepiness of mind over matter, of decision over heart.

"I must find a place to stay," I blurted out, as if by his words, my fate was set, and I picked up my suitcase to leave. Yet — I wanted to stay. The coolness of this high ceiling room, the solitude of its vastness locked and walled away from the harshness of the outside world. This boy, who had made me feel wanted in a society that relished the exile of the lonely, the putting off of my

interview ,was to me an intoxication. Someone had said stay. That magic word. And I knew I must stay.

"I think I can help you," he said readily. He came around the bar and took my suitcase. "I own all this, even the courtyard and the apartments around it, and there is a vacancy facing the river. You will like that —very artistic."

He gave a shy laugh.

"Some of the—eh faggots, have been wanting it, pestering the hell outa me for it, but I won't rent to their kind. Boys banging on their door day and night, and most of them don't have an occupation, other than hair dressing or shop sales work, and will steal you blind. I've been putting them off, saying I was expecting someone out of town, so you're it, as fars as they're concerned, the one I have been expecting. Hope you don't mind me throwing that it."

I replied that I didn't and we went across the lounge, by the table where the three sat staring at me from lowered lashes, and into the open courtyard.

There is something about these ancient courtyards, and like those in the French quarter in New Orleans, that seem to hypnotize me. It is identical to when I enter a cemetery. I want to whisper. I want to walk softly. And I found myself tip-toeing along the rain beaten flagstones, and my voice

purposely low whenever I talked to Truly, as if fearing to wake the ghosts which dwelled in these sun cracked walls, behind these opaque shadows, from within those closed shutters. The outside world lay closed to this hush which prevailed, like a closed heart to the ravings of a lover. Here, one could love and hate and rape and kill and the world would know nothing, would hear nothing of its chaos within. Yet, one could whisper here, and fear that the world would learn its secret.

In one corner of the courtyard, near the opposite end of the passageway that led through iron gates to the river, stood a larger than life size statue of Hermes with the infant Dionysus boy—my favorite.

Pausing, I stood beneath it, amazed as always, how the light could play along the smooth muscles and turn them into living flesh.

"Like it?" Truly asked, balancing my suitcase on one knee.

I nodded.

"Someone gave it to my father years ago. I don't remember now. Anyway, it once stood in the Pontalbo building in Jackson Square, back when the Pontalbo was military quarters for Napoleon."

Without turning, I said lowly, and I am afraid there was a catch of sadness at my throat.

"I've often wondered what Hermes was holding in his right hand before his arm was broken off."

"Probably a bunch of grapes," Truly suggested. "For Hermes was the messenger of the Gods, and here he is delivering the God of wine in his infancy to the nymphs who are to bring him up."

I said nothing to that effect, but there was a peel of wild giggles from the three within the lounge who no doubt had made some immoral remark about the statue in its nudity.

"Positively no appreciation for the arts," Truly said dryly, throwing up an arm in indication.

He led me up a flight of metal steps, through a maze of twisted Bougainvillea vines, and to my apartment which overlooked the river from the front and the courtyard from the north side.

"It's only sparcely furnished," he apologized, laying my suitcase on a bed." You may want something much finer. But there is a good bath and kitchen, and I might bring some of my furnishings from out on Plank Road."

"It'll do nicely," I said abruptly, without taking time to case the rooms. It was the lounge itself, the courtyard, and the river that had drawn me, and I was good at fixing rooms into something excitable and livable. "I have my own furniture," I added.

"I can have it shipped in."

"Good," he said then, slapping his hands together. "Then you're all set." He paused for a moment, his blue eyes fixed on me. Then he said quickly, all too quickly:

"I bet you were married once."

I did not answer.

Drag lines were tearing at my past.

His face flushed.

"Okay," he whispered, and there was deep warmth in his voice, or was it my loneliness. "So you're free again, and a new life ahead of you. You're going to like it here, Star. The change's gonna do you good."

Again, I did not answer. I went to the window and looked down on the courtyard. The flowers looked so rich and green in their dark earth beds. I remembered my mother's dry, parched verbena beds on that gaunt red hill of Mississippi.

That was all gone now—a thousand worlds away.

"Can I bring you something, Star, a drink maybe?" Truly asked thoughtfully, hurling me out of my reverie.

I turned, as if I had been struck.

I think I muttered no thanks.

He paused for a second, as if not knowing what to say, then he came to the window. "Well, let me know how you come out with your interview, and good luck. Give it all you've got, for I want you to stay—I mean

that."

His eyes probed mine and their blue, now under the sky light was intense, limpid, as soft as melted wax.

Suddenly, I realized that he was not merely making conversation. He meant what he said.

An old call, an old torment from that other world grabbed hold of my senses. I came back to reality with a jolt. No soft talk, no warm eyes for me. I lifted a hand instinctively, as if to push him away.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked readily, reaching for my billfold.

He threw up both hands in mock surprise.

"Nothing yet, Star. See how your interview comes out." He turned then and went to the stairs. There he paused. He lay a hand on the sill.

"I'll be praying for you, Star. Come see me tonight. I want your patronage. You'll be a tonic for the bar."

He gave a sex whistle then bounded down the stairs.

I could not help but laugh, realizing his gesture was playful, then busied myself unpacking my things. I still had ample time before my interview, and showered and redressed. The drinks and Truly and this lounge had worked its magic on me, and I was satisfied I could go to my interview like a King on Coronation Day. Besides, I had

money in the bank back home, good stylish clothes, nad enough furnishings to furnish an apartment four times this size.

Yet, though I know it now, I did not know it then, that fate had set this stage for me, that for the next two years, this apartment overlooking the Mississippi would be my temple, that the Black Lamp lounge would be my cathedral to which I would pay homage nightly, and that the courtyard would become in time both a battleground and a Garden of Eden. This was to be my velvet prison, and already fate was signaling out my future inmates, embarking them upon a quest in which too, in time, we would all come to intercept. That we would all clash was inevitable. Fugitives from a world that had borne us, yet had cast us out (and I am one of them now) with nerves strung and tormented by a society which enslaves us, dredges us in our desperation to wrest from that society a sordid living, deprived of equality. It is no wonder we did not murder merely for the sure joy of spilling blood. And we did that. Yes, we did that. We murdered what we could not endure, what we truly loathed—ourselves.

When I had dressed I went back to the window. The three at the table in the corner were gone. And Truly was in the courtyard feeding the cockatoos.

CHAPTER TWO

It is eight o'clock at night. My interview is over. I have returned to my apartment, have bathed, shaved, redressed, and am now crossing the courtyard to the Black Lamp lounge to tell Truly the good news. Out of all my past life put together, out of all the people I have ever known, loved, liked, hated a little, of all the places I have grown accustomed, this one day in Baton Rouge, this one day at the Black Lamp Lounge, this one person I have met, out all this, it is to him I am going tonight. It is to him whom I must tell about my job, my staying in Baton Rouge. It is he, a bartender, the only person I know now in the world to whom I can tell my good news to. Am I indeed that lonely?

Yet, a drowning man will clutch a straw, and Truly has become that straw. I am careful about my dress tonight, anxious to erase from myself, from my thoughts, and from the regime of my old life everything I have ever been before. I am still young. I am still well built, a little on the short side in height but with an animal grace that is instantly noticable, and I am still good looking. My thick dark hair is well kept, well

groomed, shiny with the bright glow of life, and my complexion is dark and utterly without blemish. I have always loved clothes, know fabrics, and my physical proportions are such that I can buy clothes merely by stating my size. Of this I am proud, for I have always hated to try on clothes in a store. It is so dismantling, and I have always strived to be at my best in the public eye. me. They see in me something of the well I think this is why girls have always liked groomed man about town, the stylized manikin, the image of success. Perhaps this is my secret. I can never, so to speak, let myself go. Whenever I ride a train or plane or a bus, I dare not, as I have often seen so many other men do, lay back in my seat and sleep, nor slip off my shoes in public, or take off my coat in church or in a theatre. I have always hated the wind for that reason. It messes the hair, throws dust on my suit, and dulls the gleam on my shoes. Too, I deplore men who allow the heels of their shoes to wear. To avoid this, I have always had taps on mine, as tonight, as I stroll across the courtyard, immaculate in my black continental suit, white shirt, and black shoe-string tie, the light tap of my Italian heels turns the heads of those occupying the small marble tables along the dimly lit flagtsones.

I pause near the iron cage, speak gallantly

to the cockatoos, hopeful that Truly will observe me full length, then make my way slowly, cock-surely, into the lounge.

I approach the bar, to the exact location I had stationed myself earlier that day, and am greeted by a smiling Truly. He reaches out a hand, and as I place my hand in his, his face takes on the radiance of what I would term the epitome of victory. It should be captured in bronze. It brings to mind the image of my most beloved and most admired bust, the portrait head of an African from Cyrene.

"You got the job," he half shouts, gripping my hand until it hurts, and I genuinely believe he is prouder than I am over the feat. "Boy, oh boy, am I glad. Now you can stay in the apartment and I hope will keep me company at the bar. I get bored as hell listening to the same old tune night after night." He shoots the man next to me a sullen glance.

The bar is surprisingly crowded, and I have to squeeze in next to the man who is drinking in Truly's and my every word.

"This place is reserved for Mr. Star," Truly says to the man, who squirms under the obvious insult. Yet, he begrudgingly moves down a bit and I take my station.

"The usual?" Truly suggests, holding up a tumbler.

I nod.

"Well! Who is she?" the man asks, with a wild fling of his hand, directing his question more to me than to Truly. "Mr Important?"

Truly gives me a wink.

'That, sir, is Mr. Star, famous artist for the wonderful state of Louisiana. He comes from Paris, and just to paint a mural on the Capitol's walls."

The man, who is in his fifties, turns and glares at me, as if he has seen a monster. His face has the contours of a figure in wax held above a lighted candle, his lower jaw sagging under rolls of loose flesh, his thin lips like a painted gash, his eyes imprisoned in twin blue-puffed circles. He studies me intently, bitterly, Jealous I can tell. Then he turns once more to Truly.

"For a moment, I thought she was Missus Astor."

Truly sits the tumbler on the bar with a hard clang.

"Now listen, Beverly, don't refer to him as she or misses—he's straight—and a decent guy."

I am triumphant.

"Come off it, Truly," the man persists, waving his cigarette like a banner in battle. "Who are you trying to fool? Surely not this old sugar daddy. You know and I know that everything that comes in here is a long way

from straight."

Truly's eyes gleam like police searchlights.

The old man quivers. He knows he has made a blunder.

"So—I apologize to this young gentleman," he says finally, but he underscores that word gentleman. "Environment breeds familiarity, and this, Mr. Star, is second home to me. My name is Misses Hettie Beverly, and I don't mind at all adding the misses and leaving off the mister. In fact, it's most convenient. You'd be surprised how much time it saves. I'm getting too old—my what a dreadful thought—to twittle my time away playing at something I'm not. I like men, so there too!"

He laughs coquettishly, his arm poised on the bar, his cigarette dangling, as he puffs the smoke from his lungs in one exhausted breath.

"Every man—er girl to her own poison," I say, agreeing, yet merely for the sake of conversation and with nothing in mind better to say.

"That a boy," he says, tapping me on the shoulder. "Why fight it. Grin, take what you can, and let the devil have the hindmost." He pauses for an instant, gives a nervous puff on his cigarette, then resumes his oration. "I'm sorry I was so brash a moment ago, but I get carried away at times, es-

pecially when my self importance gets
moted. You see, Mr. Star, my career is a
ing, and—."

"He's a movie star, straight from Holl
wood," Truly says, interrupting. He winks
me again as he sits my drink before m
"He used to be in the silent flicks. That
before you and I were born, Star." Truly
being sarcastic.

"You dirty bitch!" the man scowls, b
then lets out a wry smile. Truly slaunts
down the bar to serve two extremely t
boys who have just come into the lounge.

In a way I cannot explain, I hate to s
Truly leave my side, for he serves as a kin
of protection for me. Too, I want to talk t
him about my new job. At intervals, he look
my way, as if checking on me, which I lik
immensely, and he is always ready wi'h
smile when I glance in his direction. Tha
smile is pure gold in this land of the lonely
He cares what happens to me. I need tha
now. I need that now more than anything i
the world. I need a friend, though outwardly
I fight off any advance toward me. I force
them to come to me, then rebuff them fo
their efforts. Actually, I am getting from
life what I deserve. But after my recent
past, and since my arrival in Baton Rouge
my good luck in grabbing a job, I have made
an oath to try and be more warm hearted
toward others. And I ask myself: How can

I expect to get anything unless I give in return?

But my past! Oh, God—my past!

If only I can forget.

Truly is looking at me, though not wanting me to know it. He is smiling again now. His whole face lights up when he smiles. Even his blue eyes smile. Their light goes over me like warm oil.

I quickly turn away and stare toward the courtyard. I see a young couple sitting close together in the far shadows, a boy and a girl, both flaxen blonds, no more than seventeen they seem. I am jealous. Suddenly I hate them. They ring up my past like a cash register. They are ine love, deeply, profoundly in love. A blind man could see it. Yet, they do not touch. I gulp at my drink like a starving dog. I check myself. My mind is a battleground. I am refighting battles that have been refought over and over a thousand times. I see myself sitting in the boy's place, and the girl, that long golden hair! I quickly turn back to the bar, facing the mirror. I see my own reflection, and all the others strung along that drinking trough. I watch Truly through the mirror. He keeps turning from the drinks he is fixing and looking in my direction. A man at the other end of the bar is winking at me. I pretend not to notice.

The old man, Mr. Beverly, nudges me.

"Did I go sour on you?" he asks, flirting with me with his cigarette, posing it delicately, obviously, so that I will see.

I shook my head.

"Hope I did not make you mad when I called Truly a bitch (I had already forgotten) but we—we girls kid him a lot. Oh, he takes it in good stride. One of the untouchables!"

My interest became alive once more. I was glad to hear this. I wanted a friend, but without the other. And I was glad to learn that Truly maintained a principal—perhaps he would know some girls. We could all go out.

"Are you sure?" I found myself blurting out, and I could have bit my tongue.

"So you're interested," the old man said, and with the wisdom of the ages. "Don't blame you (I frowned), but who isn't. He's been chased by every queen between here and California and not one of them has caught him yet. And I know the facts. Listen, Mr. Star (he was careful to use that word Mr.) I know Gaston. He's the best friend I've got and he tells me everything—but everything (he strings this out) and listen, nobody, just nobody gets past him. And he's tried to make Truly a hundred times and hasn't even gotten a nibble. Poor soul! She's even offered to give him a new house. She even had it so bad with him she had to go

to the hospital in order to settle her nerves. Truly had her climbing the walls, and God only knows what would have happened to her if he had allowed her to touch him. Why! she would have had a miscarriage!" He breathed heavily, letting out a despondant sigh." But not me. I've been through hell and beaten wtih cat guts during my day trying to make love to one of these untouchables, and it just doesn't pay. I've learned long ago to pick them up on a street corner, pay them five dollars or whatever they ask, then do to them what you please. It saves wear and tear on the nerves — and the heart."

His head sagged then, and he stared absently into his drink. The candle had burned longer now it seemed beneath his face, and the walls of flesh seemed to be slipping from his skill. His lips looked puffed, and his downcast eyes were like that of a turtles, shimmed over with a thin film.

"It's a hard life, Mr. Star, trying to make love to a hard tailed boy who can never be nothing but a real he man—like Truly there. You give everything. They give nothing in return. Nobody can live under such pressure. It's like taking a file and scrapping it against the heart."

I turn now and look at him—really look for the first time. His words a path to my heart. I understand what he means. I grip my

empty glass. Golden curls fall before my eyes. I reach out to entwine them in my hand. I can feel the file cutting into my flesh.

"Want another drink?"

Truly is standing over me.

"Please," I mutter. His smile brings me back. He takes my glass, refills it, and brings it back to me.

I look at Mr. Beverly. I am sorry for him. At the moment, he is showing his age. He is ancient in the amber light of the bar. His thin fingers, their nails tapered, polished, are like an old woman's. They cling to the cigarette helplessly. The smoke makes a dance above his head. His white hair is like phosphorous in the woods at night. Love for the impossible has stripped him of all former glory. Like a ship, he sinks before my eyes. He drowns in his own despair.

"Mr. Beverly," I whisper, trying to arouse him from his stupor. He slowly raises his bobbling head and it is like a skull, his eyes red gouges in his face, his eyebrows like the tuff of a lynx's.

"Forgive me," he whispers, trying, in a futile attempt to pose his cigarette in the obvious manner, all his former haughtier gone, all the battle of self-importance for which he had so determinedly fought when first we met, retreating into accepted defeat. I know now it is not from drink. It is

the past that has intoxicated him.

Slowly, he regains his composure, his reformation gone by un-noticed by anyone but me, and perhaps Truly who gazes at him at intervals with a look of complete disdain.

There is an uproar of giggles down the bar, punctuated by the sudden throb of a juke-box number, and he sits up rigidly, with both elbows on the bar, smoothes back his white hair, and eyes himself in the huge mirror. He seems once more satisfied with his appearance, his conduct, and he turns to me and smiles, displaying elongated teeth made even more grotesque by an edging of gold.

"Where is your precious Truly? I need another drink."

I motion for Truly who hurries toward us. My feeling sorry for the old bastard vanishes, as his stiff necked pride resumes its former wrath. He too has deserved what he has gotten out of life.

"A double martini," he says gruffly," and whatever your lover boy here wants!" He pokes a thumb at me. I place my hand over my glass as a refusal. I do not look his way.

"Sure Star's my lover," Truly says laughingly, letting out a cat call. "Came all the way from Paris just to break a poor country boy's heart!"

"Break your hard you mean," Mr. Beverly grunts. "High time somebody did, or else

you're gonna die a virgin."

"At least I can get one up," Truly bar ters, glancing my way to note how I wa taking it.

"Prove it!" came a loud chorus of voice along the bar.

Truly does a quick imitation of a hul dancer.

Yells and whistles drown out the thump thump of the juke-box, then silence again as Truly stops dancing to wait on an ex tremely tall man who appears out of no where and stands behind Mr. Beverly. I give him a slight once over, then turn my at tention on my drink. The rythm of the juke box takes on a haunting, savage refrain, and the tall man moves his torso back and forth in time with the cadence.

"You got a cute crowd tonight, Truly," the tall man cries, his eyes rolling ceiling- ward, then pivoting towards me. I know he is looking but I do not return his stare. "I like 'em dark and good looking and black headed—my oh! daddy oh!"

"Shut your trap, Gaston!" the old man shouted, turning on the white plastic stool And he pointed at me with a delicate turn of his wrist. "That's Truly's paramoor - hands off! All hands—hands off!"

"Are you crowding my boyfriend, Gas ton?" Truly cries, coming down the bar and burlesquing a flaming disapproval.

"Well! Deliver me!" the tall guy laments, and he throws up both hands in a gesture of pure innocence. His eyes—painted eyes—finds mine and they are like liquid glass. "A girl never knows who's going with who these days. It doesn't pay to leave town these days. The minute my back is turned everybody gets married."

"Serves you right," the old man laughs," for chasing some punk to New Orleans. You oughta come up pregnant!"

The tall boy twists his torso aimlessly, then winks down the length of the bar.

"Well, at least I'm not too old to conceive."

There is a roar of laughter.

Immediately I turn away and stare toward the now completely dark courtyard. The two young lovers are gone.

There is a catch in my breath. It shocks me, their absence. I do not know why I expect them to still be there. They are nothing to me. Yet, I suppose, to know that someone like them, young, pure, in a place like this, amidst these weirdos, gives me a certain kind of comfort, of satisfaction.

I turn to Truly.

"Do you know where that young couple went?"

He leans on the counter as I point toward the empty table in the courtyard.

"Oh — Jesse and Jessalyn — them! Our

Romeo and Juliet!" he gives a light shrug as if it doesn't matter. "They're probably down on the ferry riding over and back."

"Do they live on the other side?" I ask, though I do not know why. Perhaps its their blond hair, their youth, the way they look at one another, I do not know. For some reason I cannot get them out of my mind. Perhaps it is because they have everything in each other, it seems, and I have nothing. They are like faces in a movie I have seen and loved and cannot forget. I fidget with my drink.

"In Port Allen?" Truly replies. He picks up my glass and wipes away the water. He lays a paper napkin on the bar and sets my glass on top of it. He is especially attentive to me. I like this, makes me feel important, and God knows, I need to feel this way.

"No, they both live here in Baton Rouge," he continues. "But a lot of times at night, they ride the ferry to and fro across the river, pretending they are going to Paris or Italy or Europe or some place like that. They're cute kids, and madly in love — you know, the kind you read about in romantic southern novels."

"You couldn't pry them apart with a crowbar," Mr. Beverly says, swinging his stool round to face me, and completely ignoring Gaston. He appears back to his old sarcastic self. "Love like that went out when the talk-

ies came in. All people want now is sex—sex—sex!"

"You excluded, of course," Gaston raps, equally sarcastic. "Nothing but balcony love scenes and happy endings for our movie star."

Mr. Beverly swings back.

"Your especially insulting tonight, Gaston," he says with a nasty sneer. "Of course I love sex—what queen doesn't. But that does not keep me from liking and admiring the kind of love those two kids have—it's refreshing, believe me, after all this kind of shit!"

I understand what he means. He has made a few points with me.

"And as for the movies," he rambles on, waving his cigarette with a series of jerks, "I've made plenty of them, as you already know. You've sat and drolled over enough of them in front of my projector at home. You'd get an erection every time the leading men came on the screen."

"Oh, I agre with you, Pops," Gaston cries, turning this way and that to take note of his admirers, the younger men lining the bar on the left side of him. He punctures the air with a cigarette which is thrust from a long pearl studded holder. The trails of smoke makes fantastic patterns above the bar.

"Don't call me pops!" Mr. Beverly

shrieks.

"But those silent screen stars were han some," Gaston keeps up, completely igno ing Mr. Beverly. He has the floor mome tarily and he knows it. His eyes keep dartin in my direction.

"You're damned right they were hand some," Mr. Beverly brings up a defense, hi head cocked back, his boney shoulders pres sed rigidly against the back rest of the white plastic stool." You miserable bitch You think these punks in here are good look ing. You think young men of today are the handsomest bits of flesh you ever nibbled You make me sick at my bowels. These sex- less, halfboy-halfgirl guys with their beatle hair cuts, their Roman forehead sweeps, their balboas, their collegeboy crew cuts, the Elvis Presley gigolos—but dear me, I can't knock him—you think these are all cute and the last word in real honest to goodness mas' culinity."

The old man had a point. I detested beatle haircuts. I also considered them to be sex- less—Mores—neither male nor female.

Mr. Beverly keeps up his oration.

"Just take a gander at Wallace Reid from Maria Rosa or in Joan the Woman, or take Richard Barthelmess in the Seven Swans and Broken Blossoms, or Vernon Steele in Polly of the Circus, or even Rudolph Valen- tino in the Young Rajah—what a physique!

or in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

A young, dark haired kid gets up and goes through the motions of a spanish dancer.

The shout, "toro! toro!" goes up as someone pretends to swing a cape.

"Or even Ramon Novarro," Mr. Beverly continues, giving them the sign with a long pointed finger. "Or John Gilbert or Charles Ray or Richard Cortez or Antonio Moreno. You shoulda seen him in My American Wife with Gloria Swanson. I know them all, have worked with them—use to see them everyday."

"Famous movie star! Famous movie star!" goes up in a high falsetto chorus. There is a long row of obvious profiles, mimicing John Barrymore. Two well built boys get up and go through the flashing maneuvers of duelers, taking on the air of Douglas Fairbanks and Joseph Schilkraut.

"Gang of whores!" Mr. Beverly spits. "No depth—positively no depth! Nobody appreciates anything these days—absolutely nothing!"

I'll buy that, I am thinking.

Truly leans closer to me, as if apologizing.

"It's not this way every night. A lot of girls come here too. I want you to meet my girl, Star, you'll like her—a sculptoress."

"A sculptress, my ignorant broth of a boy," Mr. Beverly corrects him, pecking at

his cigarette, letting the ashes fall on t
counter.

Truly glares at him, whips up the ash
"Thanks, Mr. Einstein!" He turns back
me. "Anyway, some Sunday I'll bring h
down here. The Lamp's closed then. We
have the whole day to ourselves."

"Has she got a friend?" I ask, my hop
soaring. I needed the companionship of
female worse than the desert needs wate

"I'll fix you up." Truly pats me on th
arm roughly. He is all masculine. I notic
his broad shoulders, as he turns and goe
down the length of the bar, see his reflectio
in the amber-lit mirror. It's like looking a
someone from another world. Like a mirag
maybe, or some kind of fantastic vision. H
moves with the easy grace of an animal. His
reflection, framed in the winking crystal, the
probing pin pricks of red and emerald and
amber, cast his image against a myriad o
strs. He is the most dominate thing ni the
building. As I watch him serving drinks
seeing him both realistically and through
the mirror, saying to myself that I have a
hope for the future, trying to convince my-
self that through him I may have a friend—
one friend! God! I see another reflection. It
is the face of a young boy who sits behind
me at a table. He is looking at me. He sees
that I have seen him so he drops his eyes.
He is a good looking boy, not over seven-

teen I imagine, yet he must be eighteen, I ponder, to be able to get into this bar. A high school senior no doubt. He has that clean scrubbed look, thtt soap and water look. His hair is chestnut brown and is brushed over his forehead in an indication of bangs. It is so thick it shines in the amber light like a helmet. His eyes are dark brown too, dusky behind long black lashes. He is wearing a white T-shirt, which fits like the skin, his smooth muscular arms and thick neck are like the skin of Roman athletes you see in a technicolor movie. He almost smells of soap and tonic and freshly minted shave lotion. He is that clean. As innocent as a lamb! Was I ever that young?

God! If I could only go back to that age —start over again.

I am thinking now of what my great aunt once said:

"The greatest tragedy in life, son, is not being able to undo what you have already done."

If I could only go back!

I take a sip of my drink. The boy is watching me again. He shifts his direction of sight, pretends to be watching the cockatoos in the cage at the edge of the lounge who are disturbed by the juke-box music.

I am curious about this boy. I risk damaging my self-styled pride. I turn now, prop one foot on Mr. Beverly's stool. I look at

him, one long piercing look, feigning the
clination that I do not appreciate his st
ing. My old haughtier again! He looks
me, looks directly this one fleeting sec
His huge brown eyes are as soft, as wa
as friendly as a collie dog's.

I notice he is wearing shorts, gray pla
interlaced with navy blue or black. I can
tell. It is too dark. His naked legs are a
dark, like unhusked pecans, and they
laden with wiry black hair. With a qu
thrust of my body, I pivot back toward
bar. Through the mirror, I see Truly star
at me. He has that hurt look. He realiz
I know that he has seen us. He comes
along side me.

"A good kid," he says, nodding in t
boy's direction.

"Who?" I ask sheepishly, pretending
difference.

He nods again. "The boy who keeps look
ing at you."

I hadn't noticed," I lie.

"He admires you," Truly adds. His blan
face has that too honest look. I do not trus
it.

"In what way?" I ask, and I try to soun
disgusted. I made a poor best of it. I blam
it on the drinks, and not my natural conti
ence.

"Not that way," Truly informs me, smi
ing a little. He gives a shake of his hea

toward the long line of effeminate men. "Probably likes your build. Name's Rowdy, goes to Baton Rouge High, goes out for track, javelin throwing, the discus, a weight lifting fanatic. He no doubt thinks you are a body builder—you got the build for it. A egular Mickey Hagethey."

I laugh. He taps me on my shoulder with his fist.

"Your putting me on," I say. "Flattery will get you anything!

"That's my boy," he whispers. There is meaning in his voice. I can tell. He really likes me.

The boy is still looking. Truly pulls up a stool opposite me and sits down. He is beginning to look tired. Circles are beginning to appear under his radiant blue eyes—and his forehead is beaded with sweat. He is being admired by every person in the bar. I can understand why. He has what it takes.

"Sometimes, I think I would rather dig ditches than fight this crowd," he says lowly, drawing out his words. He looks even tireder now, now that he has confessed his weariness. I study him, notice how the long lashes around his eyes curl back, so long, they touch his eyebrows. They too are wet with sweat and sparkle like dew.

"But you like our company, don't you," Gaston speaks up. He thinks he can afford to be pleasant to all, the gimmick of all

overly popular people.

"Yes—yes, I like your company, Gast
Truly confirms, though his voice is bit
There is acid contempt in its every tone
see that he despises those he serves with
kind of reckless rebellion he at times d
not attempt to conceal. He glances down
length of the bar, as one might look do
the prow of galley slaves. He looks but
does not see. He is looking beyond the
through them, as if they are not there
all, or, if they are, they are invisible.

It makes me think of a cheap side-sh
I once attended. There was a girl sho
strippers, and as they pulled off the
clothes, one by one, their eyes had that lo
—glass clear—cold, utterly cold!

Mr. Beverly is rising from his stool no
Gaston, that tall, utterly effeminate guy
looking at me. His painted eyes are li
daggers.

"Hettie and I are going across the riv
to the Carousel, care to join us, eh, M
Star?" he says to me, laying a thin hand
my shoulder. Then, he says, on an aft
thought, reading skepticism in my sta
"The parties on us, isn't it, Hettie. We gi
always pay."

I glance quickly at Truly. He shakes h
head.

"Some other time perhaps," I decline hi
invitation, smoothing it over as calmly as

knew how. I would not have gone with him to the end of the bar, let alone across the Mississippi.

They both look abashed. They are at a loss to their next move.

"See you later, darling!" Gaston finally says, waving one long boney arm in the way that a show girl would do. They weave weave through the maze of tables, pause for a moment at Rowdy's table. I quickly look through the mirror, curious at the results of their conversation with him. He is shaking his head. I grin to myself. They slaunter off, disappear through the long hallway and into complete darkness. Rowdy sits staring at his beer bottle.

I weaken. I tell Truly to take him over another beer, on me.

Truly looks at me askew.

"He'll consider that as an invitation," he mutters.

I frown. "I did not realize," I explain.

"It's not your fault," Truly consoles. "Straight people don't know the score. There's a weird set of rules in a place like this. But you'll learn, in time. And believe me, it takes time. When I first took over this lounge, I thought this bunch was the friendliest gang of men I had ever met. I learned quick that their friendliness was only a ruse to get something else. Like Rowdy there, he's learned."

"You mean, they've had him?" I ask, b
I am hating myself for asking. Why shou
I care if they have taken him to bed or n
"No," Truly says abruptly, too abrupt
"And they never will, not nobody. Rowdy
as straight as Geronimo's arrow."

This bit of information gives me a certai
kind of moral satisfaction. I would certain
hate to see a clean cut kid like him take
by the likes of Mr. Beverly or Gaston, o
any of these other make-believe men.
glance through the mirror. Rowdy is sti
looking. His face is bland, pensive. There i
a satisfaction to it. Perhaps he feels mora
supremecy for refusing them. I admire hi
for this, a real boy. In my moment of weak
ness, I give him a hint of a smile. His face
is bursting with radiance. He is smiling
back so that his teeth gleam like a sea
shell.

Two young boys come over to the vacant
stools Gaston and Mr. Beverly have aban
doned. They are small in stature, as small
as dainty as girls. Their hair is coiffered
both dyed snow white, and there is make-up
on their eyes. Their slim physiques are
made slimmer still by their attire, tight
canary yellow peddle pushers which strike
their knees and black blouse-type shirts
which tie in front near their naval. They
are wearing white ballet shoes. At first I
think they are girls—teen age girls decked

ut in boyish clothes, but they are the exact opposite—boys in girls sports attire.

The one nearest me places his hand on the empty stool where Mr. Beverly had sat and rubs the white plastic.

"As cold as a witch's broomstick," he says dramatically, then sits down. "That old auntie hasn't got enough blood left in her to keep herself warm, let alone this stool!" He says this to the other one, but obviously loud enough for me to overhear.

"And that bitchy Gaston!" the other one ridicules in a high toned fashion. "She's so tall, she could hunt wild geese with a rake." They giggle foolishly. Truly gives me a side-long glance. "Imagine what she would look like in drag. She would look like she was on stilts."

"What'll you girls have?" Truly asks, still sitting.

"Oh—the usual!" the one next to me coos, craving an attempt to sound cosmopolitan.

"And what is that?" Truly deflates his ego. "My memory is vague except for those who are V.I.P.'s."

"Aren't we very important people, Truly?" one of them asks, his voice tremulous, a bit sad. The sound touches me. I turn and look at him. There is smething oddly tragic in his features, the high cheek bones, the pale, utterly pale complexion, the dark contrasting eye shadow, the mop of glistening white hair, something theatrical, something on the

Truly looks at me and winks.

"When you leaving for Hollywood?"

They both pause. Their faces take on a numb expression.

"Oh, I don't rightly know yet," Elfa says, advertising her own skepticism. "But I gave him my number and he's supposed to contact me before he leaves."

"What are you going to be in the picture?" Truly questions, carrying the farce a bit further. He seems amused by their hypocrisy.

"He said for me to just act natural," Elfa laments, and his voice dies suddenly, like an old victrola that has unwound.

Truly fixes their "usual" which, obviously, he knew of long since, and brings them back and sets them on the bar in front of them. They have been eyeing me spasmodically while Truly was waiting on them, and, now on his return, the one called Faire rises and leans over the bar. He pretends at whispering, but his voice is audible to my ears, as he brazingly intends.

"Truly, who is that beautiful—and I mean simply beautiful hunk of male over there?"

Truly is being difficult. "He's my friend."

Faire slaps his hand on the bar with a loud crack. "Well! your a lot of help! I know he's your friend, but who? He's not one of those movie stars on location here, is he?"

There is a sudden look of defeat on Truly's

face, as though he has lost a battle and, glancing at me, he shrugs his shoulders, as if to say: "Hell—what can I do about it."

He makes a gallant bow from the waist, takes Faire by the tip of his fingers, and says with unrelentless dignity. "Miss Faire, I would like for you to meet Mr. Star, famous artist who, through my compelling persuasion, has decided to make his permanent home in our fair city. Mr. Star (and he looks at me with those piercing blue eyes of his) this is Miss Faire, and her companion and dearest friend, Miss Elfa."

I summon every ounce of my calm. I too, bow from the waist.

"The pleasure is mine, I'm sure," I say smoothly, allowing the words to roll over my tongue like water.

"The most exciting people come to Baton Rouge!" Elfa declares, flinging both hands over his heart. They scramble over the stools to get a better look at me, like monkeys scramblnig for peanuts, and their eyes carry that haunting, piercing, glittering stare that is unmistakably their calling card.

"I pity you now," Truly says, and he throws both hands in mock horror. "I have thrown you to the bitches!"

We all laugh. I am disgusted. I feign an honesty I am far from feeling.

"We're not bitches," Faire demands, his

eyes now on Truly icy cold. "We're ni girls—straight from the Boulevard's finis ing school."

Lanquidly, I check on Rowdy through th amber-lit mirror. He is rising from his tabl obviously disgusted too by Elfa's and Faire nauseating reactions to Truly's burlesque introduction. I do not blame him. Again, admire him. He turns now, slightly awa from me. He gazes in my direction. H looks, as if to say good-bye. He leaves passes through the courtyard and beyond the iron gates to the dark street. His ab sence leaves a blank, hollow place at the table he occupied. I stare at it, longingly. I feel that absence. Like I felt the absence when the young blond lovers vacated the courtyard. There was a deep pounding which vibrates against my heart. They were the only decent things, the only clean things, the only innocent things in this place—Jesse and Jessalyn, and Rowdy—with the excep tion of Truly.

I want to leave now. The dark walls are closing in on me. The amber mirror is hazy, begrimed with golden light, streaked with moving faces, blurred faces. I am not drunk. Except on the past. God! How I wish now that I could live it over. I would be clean —like Rowdy, innocent—like Jesse and Jess alyn.

Faire and Elfa were turned now from me,

their black and yellow attire decorous notes in the emblazoned setting. Two other young men had approached them, and they were now engaged in a frivilous conversation—perhaps retelling the movie ordeal—and I loathed to listen.

This is my cue to leave.

I wave to Truly. He hurries to my side.

"You're not leaving, Star?" he mutters. His face is sadly tired now, streaked with silver streams of sweat. I hate to leave him. I like him. His deep blue eyes are concerned, honest. I hate to leave them too.

"I have some letters to write," I say lowly, assuming the dignified air of importance myself.

He drops his eyes. His face looks haggard ni the uncertain light. Suddenly I feel sorry for him. I would like to ask him to close the bar and come with me and do the town, find some girls, but I do not.

"Well, see you tomorrow night," he says, his voice low, plaintive. He attempts a smile. His dimples show, but that is all.

"Sure thing," I assure him. I leave. I go through the courtyard, by the cage with the cockatoos, run my fingers along the wires, watch them flutter like Elfa and Faire, then through the passageway where Rowdy had gone a short while ago, through the iron gates and out on Lafayette. Two boys are leaning against the dark outside wall smok-

ing cigarettes. They are talking in under-tones. One has a jacket draped over his shoulder and looks like a gril.

As I go down the street toward the ferry landing, as if drawn, as if conjured, I overhear one of them say to the other.

"Looks like the Greeks are in town tonight." I frown, appalled that they thought me from one of the trade ships. I go down the metal steps to the ferry landing. Two figures meet me coming up the narrow floating bridge that leads to the ticket house. They are Jesse and Jessalyn. They speak softly. Obviously they had seen me in the lounge earlier.

I buy a ticket and go aboard the ferry and it moves out into midstream.

The ferry moves now from the small tin building and turns in a wide arc toward Baton Rouge. Like Jesse and Jessalyn, I have come to Paris, and am going back to the United States. I can't pretend like they can. I'm too old for that. I never could pretend. I could never mend over the shattered cracks in life and pretend the mended places were good as new. Perhaps, that is what is wrong with me. We are over that pit of blackness now. Jump! Jump! I grip the vertical rail supports. I put one foot on the balustrade. I lift my body. There is a couple a few yards from me. They are making love. The girl's face is swallowed

up in the man's embraces. I hear whisperings. Now there are sobs. I walk to the opposite side of the deck. The ferry moves toward Baton Rouge, bumps along the sides of the ticket house. There is a grinding of metal. There is the steady lapping of water. Somewhere a girl giggles. I hear a boy's voice calling after her.

I go down the stairs, cross the floating ramp and up the metal steps where I had met the young couple a short while ago. I pause and look up at the sky. The moon has wiggled free of its net now and is gliding out into the open sea.

I return to the lounge, through the iron gates and into the courtyard. I can see into the lounge and it is vacated. Only Truly is left, and he is busy cleaning up. The red lamp at the end of the bar is trapping him with its light, and his body is bathed in scarlet. I stand and watch him for awhile. He is alone, yet there is not that about him which advertises loneliness. He is occupied, one more day's end to a long line of successive schedules. Somehow I envy him. The pattern of his life is set, fixed. He knows that. What a happy thought, to know that tomorrow will be as pleasant as today.

Beneath my breath I whisper good night to him, then I turn and go up the steps to my apartment.

CHAPTER THREE

It is Saturday at dusk. From my apartment window, looking west, I see several foreign ships anchored in the harbor, but the last rays of the dying sun have eclipsed them into silhouettes of faint blackness and I cannot read their names. Whatever they are, I am certain they're romantic—whether Greek, French, Holland, or German. Soon after six o'clock, an ant file of sailors will come up those metal steps which lead from the ferry and they will disperse throughout Baton Rouge, seeking out bars and dance halls and girls and whatever makes them tick. They will be aureoled in an atmosphere of gaiety, of laughter, of complete abandon, unleashed with that kind of determined laxity that borders on recklessness. They have money to splurge and they will splurge it tonight.

I have bathed and dressed, keeping ritual with my black continental suit, black shoestring tie, but I have decided to wear my pale lavender ruffled breasted shirt with the French cuffs. I feel especially festive tonight. White will not do. My furniture came in this morning and I have occupied the whole of the day arranging it in proper

or what I call proper) order.

Already I love my apartment, love it more now that my things have arrived, and it will, as now, I can look my fill of my rows and rows of books, gifts friends have bestowed upon me back when my life was one long string of happy days, and my drawing table, my stool, my urn stacked with assorted brushes. I look about me, filling my eyes and my heart with all the precious things that link my present to the past.

At least I have this! Thank God. At least I have this!

Suddenly I want to cry but no tears will come. I want to scream but no sounds will come from my lips. I want to go limp, to give up but I straighten up, brace myself for the future, whatever it is. I must not spoil my mood of gaiety. Saturday's are always Truly's best nights for business, and I am dressed for that occassion. I satisfy this whim of vanity by studying myself in the full length bathroom door mirror. My dark hair shines like polished patent leather. My black suit is immaculate and fits with a tapering V to my narrow waist. My slacks take the shap of my stout legs and stop at the arch of my Italian high-heeled shoes, without a dimple. The ruffles of my lavender shirt stand up stiffly like the delicate wings of butterflies. My huge

cuff links, fashioned like the gold dis
which bull fighters wear, wink at me fro
the reflection. My heavy rings, both silv
with black onyx settings, while I adjust m
cuffs so that they will extend two inches b
yond my coat sleeves, shine back at me lik
the eyes of dragons. I have attained th
tiny touch of gaudiness which I love.

I cross my apartment and look out th
window to the courtyard below. It is empt
but within the lounge, the carriage lamp
yet unlit, I can make out movement.

I lock my door, go down the steps, tak
a whiff of the cologne I am wearing, an
cross the courtyard. The evening is coo
The sun is now gone, and the sky towar
the west is crimson, dabbed with thi
streaks of bright gold.

I can smell the fresh aroma of m
cologne which I have rubbed over my body
"the Greek horseman", above the frag
rance of the courtyard blossoms, and I hop
the scent will prevail. And I thank fate fo
the dusk breeze, for it will be pleasant be
neath the dome of the lounge. This is my
cue. I have timed it to the second. I have
been noticed. Heads are turning to look a
me. I go in.

Truly sees me. He is busy at wiping th
bar in front of my "seserved" stool. Hi
face is lighting up with a "happy to se

you" smile. I greet him cordially. For some reason we always shake hands.

"Star, you look like a Mississippi gambler tonight," he says, lifting his hand and touching his forefinger to his thumb and making a round O. "And that's meant to be a compliment. You're looking sharp as hell."

I could not help but laugh under this kind of flattery, and I click my teeth in indication of my approval. It is good to look good, feel good, and be told about it.

"You're kind of splendid yourself," I say, and I mean this wholeheartedly. I had noticed since a week ago that he had changed from wearing his usual white short sleeved shirt and black tie to something more colorful, and tonight, he is wearing a salmon pink sports shirt with round pearl buttons on the collar and sleeves. Under its flurescent glow his skin is radiant, his wheat colored hair like tarnished brass. Even the blue in his eyes have been swallowed up by the pink and they are glowing like coals.

He quickly mixes me a drink and brings it and sets it in front of me, complete with napkin, plastic stir stick, a book of matches, and my brand of cigarettes.

"Well, how's the mural coming?" he asks, the sound of his low voice genuinely interested.

"I have completed the cartoon for the e
tire left wall," I explain eagerly, for I h
to keep him informed of my progress. "B
I really need to do more research. I am n
too familiar with Louisiana's history."

"Try the State Library up on third street
he suggests, jutting out a thumb. "Or th
one at L.S.U." He pauses. "And if that's n
enough for you, we will take a trip to Ne
Orleans. What you can't find out down the
isn't worth knowing."

I know my eyes are telegraphing my a
preciation.

"But I don't want you to go to an
trouble."

"Nonsense," and he shakes a finger at me
"I realize that I can't help you paint, but I
want to be a part of that mural, a big par
—so let me do my little bit—eh?"

Playfully, I grab his thumb and twist it
He winks.

"I knew you'd see it my way—ole daddy
Truly knows best, now you just go along
with me."

I nod. He has won me over.

He goes down the bar to wait on a cus
tomer, a squat, humpty-dumpty sort of man
completely bald, with a roly poly face like
Spanky McFoundling, who has difficulty
reaching the stool. He is holding a huge
black cigar between stubby fingers, and in

making change, the coins slip from them and scatter on the floor. A boy who is sitting on the next stool bends and retrieves them. He is wearing faded blue-jeans, and as he bends they are drawn tight over his ass, so tight the seams of his jockey shorts show through. Obviously a young male hustler, I think, as I watch him intently, curiously. I am right. The spilling of the coins is a cue for their introduction to each other. The fat man offers the boy a beer, which he is accepting. There is a catchy, overly anxious tone to their conversation. It is an easy pick-up. I turn away, appalled. I want to spit. Worse, I see that the boy is fairly good looking. I picture them in bed together. The vision is revolting. A huge fat belly against that small wasp waist, those slim girl's legs. I ponder over the price the boy will ask. I think of Mr. Beverly and his five dollars. I see again the naked belly. My curiosity conjuring me on, I turn again and watch them through the mirror. Their heads are together. The boy is laughing. It is a feigned laugh, a mock laugh, a rehearsed laugh, like the false laugh of a prostitute who must win by that one weapon, who must gain or fall by that one deliberate performance. I imagine that white bald head sunken between those adolescent thighs, hear the squish, squish of lips, the animal groans. God! what an imagination I've got.

I turn and gaze across the now darke
ing courtyard. I take my drink and hold
in my hand so I will not have to turn bac
so I will not have to look at them in th
mirror. I watch the cockatoos flipping fro
branch to branch within their huge cag
listen attentively to the music on the jul
box, humming the tune to myself, now lis
ing the words to myself — "Johnny, whe
will Johnny go—when Johnny goes tomo
row," try to put the frightful vision of t
bald head and the kid out of my thoughts

What a stinking world!

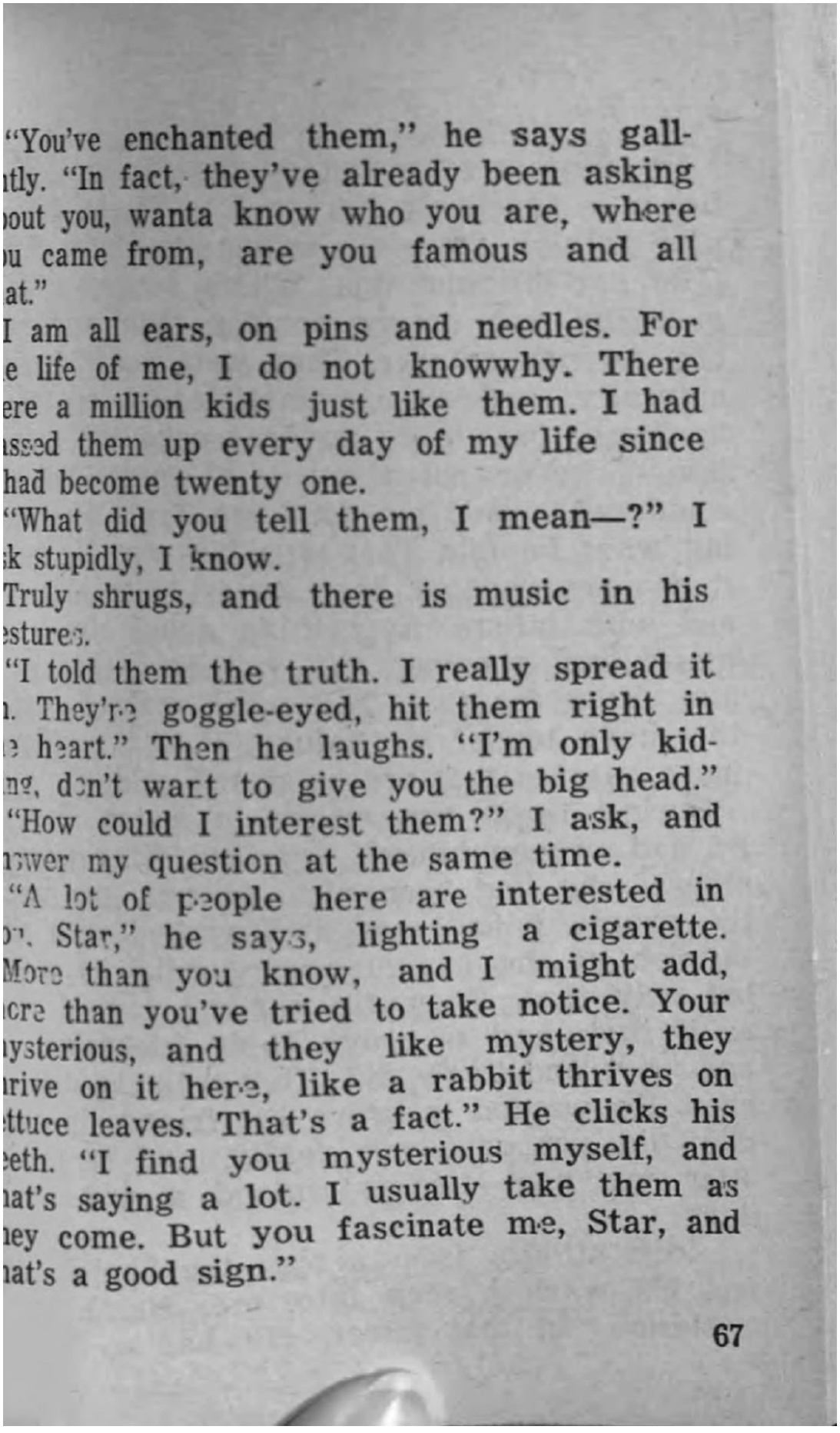
Sex—sex—sex! Nothing but sex!

Two people come through the iron ga
and cross the courtyard. Jesse and Jassal
—the lounge's favorite pair. My favori
too! They sit at a table near the fountai
The girl thrusts out her hand, lets the wat
pour over it. She flips it at Jesse playfull
They laugh. The sound is like bells ringi
to me. Innocent! God! I think of the movi
"Scudda Who—Scudda Hey." Two babes
the woods. I motion for Truly.

"I want to buy them a drink."

"They'll love you for it," he sighs.
takes them over two Pink Ladies. The
blond heads go together. He points back
me. They wave. I wave back.

After a minute or two's conversation wi
them, Truly returns to the bar. He pats
on the shoulder.



"You've enchanted them," he says gall-
ıtly. "In fact, they've already been asking
ıout you, wanta know who you are, where
ıu came from, are you famous and all
at."

I am all ears, on pins and needles. For
e life of me, I do not knowwhy. There
ere a million kids just like them. I had
ıssed them up every day of my life since
had become twenty one.

"What did you tell them, I mean—?" I
k stupidly, I know.

Truly shrugs, and there is music in his
estures.

"I told them the truth. I really spread it
ı. They're goggle-eyed, hit them right in
e heart." Then he laughs. "I'm only kid-
ng, don't want to give you the big head."

"How could I interest them?" I ask, and
ıswer my question at the same time.

"A lot of people here are interested in
r. Star," he says, lighting a cigarette.
More than you know, and I might add,
ıore than you've tried to take notice. Your
ıysterious, and they like mystery, they
ırive on it here, like a rabbit thrives on
ttuce leaves. That's a fact." He clicks his
eeth. "I find you mysterious myself, and
ıat's saying a lot. I usually take them as
ıey come. But you fascinate me, Star, and
ıat's a good sign."

and looks at me impish-like, as though he is up to some kind of mischief. I am puzzled, but my thoughts are hinged on his every move, his every gesture.

"I've got good news, too," he says, then pauses, eyes me steadily, waiting I know for me to ask him what it is. I say nothing. Then he whispers lowly, with part of his enthusiasm gone. "My girl is coming here tonight!"

"Has she got a friend?"

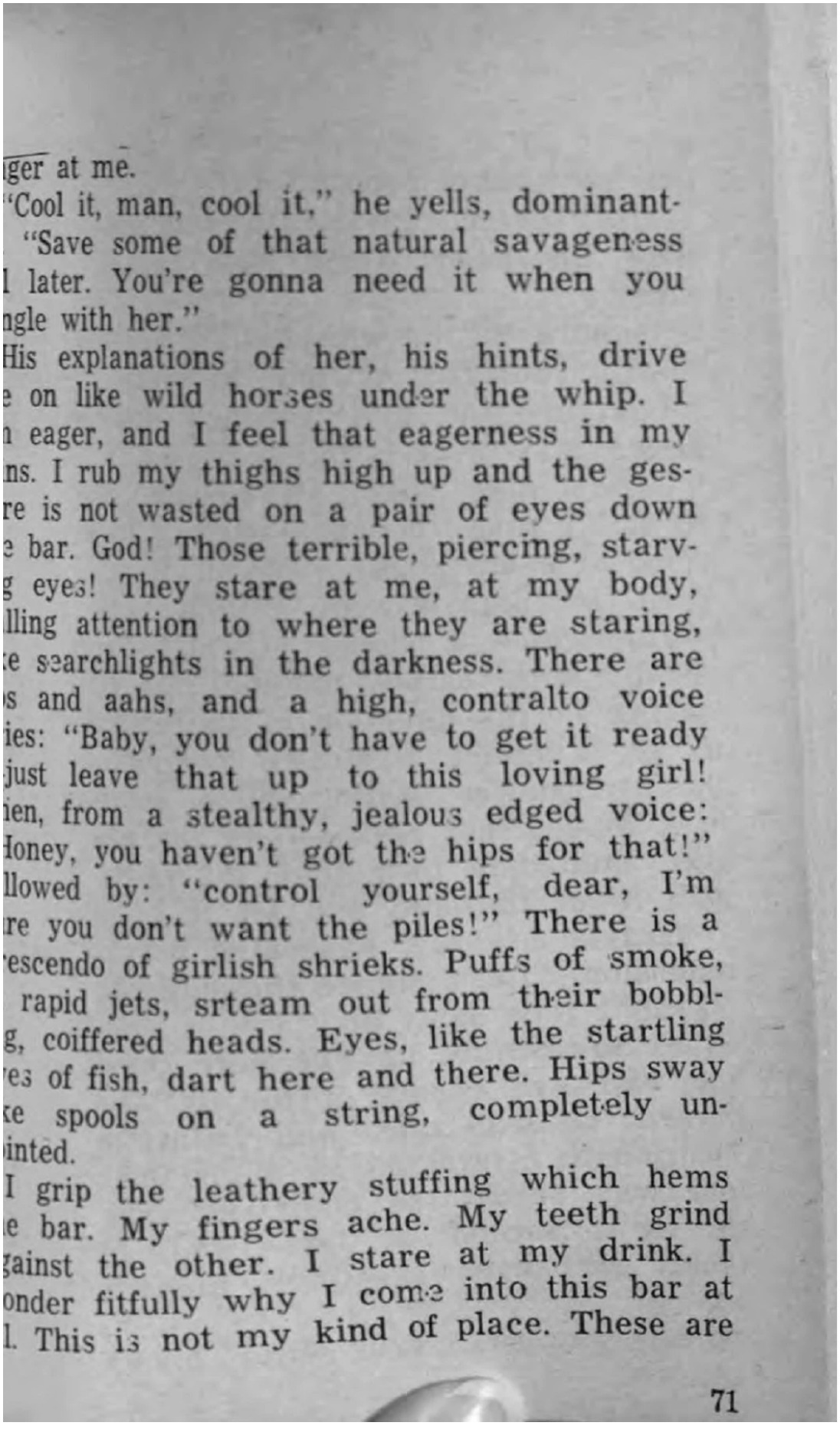
"She is going to bring Boots, if she can make it."

I know now, I was especially festive tonight for some reason. I have always believed I am physic. Now I am sure of it. I smile. I know my teeth are showing. I cannot masquerade this sudden feeling of joy.

"Who is this Boots?" I question, not that I am particular tonight. Just the sight of a female will be a relief. It's been so long.

Truly shuffles a few of the whiskey bottles behind him. He cocks his head rakishly. "I want it to be a surprise! A real surprise, Star. So ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

"Fair enough," I say, and my anticipation builds. I am so happy about it, I am nervous. I take a big gulp of my Vodka. It's fire goes through my guts like a hot poker. Truly has noticed. He shakes a warning



ger at me.
"Cool it, man, cool it," he yells, dominant-
"Save some of that natural savageness
l later. You're gonna need it when you
ngle with her."
His explanations of her, his hints, drive
e on like wild horses under the whip. I
n eager, and I feel that eagerness in my
ns. I rub my thighs high up and the ges-
re is not wasted on a pair of eyes down
e bar. God! Those terrible, piercing, starv-
g eyes! They stare at me, at my body,
lling attention to where they are staring,
e searchlights in the darkness. There are
s and aahs, and a high, contralto voice
ies: "Baby, you don't have to get it ready
just leave that up to this loving girl!
ien, from a stealthy, jealous edged voice:
Honey, you haven't got the hips for that!"
llowed by: "control yourself, dear, I'm
re you don't want the piles!" There is a
escendo of girlish shrieks. Puffs of smoke,
rapid jets, srteam out from their bobbl-
g, coiffered heads. Eyes, like the startling
es of fish, dart here and there. Hips sway
e spools on a string, completely un-
inted.
I grip the leathery stuffing which hems
e bar. My fingers ache. My teeth grind
gainst the other. I stare at my drink. I
onder fitfully why I come into this bar at
l. This is not my kind of place. These are

not my kind of people.

Truly detects my wrath, and punctuates it with his hand which slids slowly toward mine.

"Ignore it," he whispers. "They only want to rile you. They do that to every straight."

I glance at him through lowered eyebrows. I know he is right.

"They must like swallowing their own teeth," I rasp, though I attempt to keep my voice at a low pitch.

"It is their way of getting back at the world which condemns them," Truly goes on, hi slips barely moving, his blue eyes staring in the direction of the courtyard, as if his attention is drawn completely from them. "They're paying you a compliment—in a sense. They realize they can never have you, and they turn that bitterness into a joke. Feel flattered and let it go at that."

"Okay," I shrug, nauseated beyond comprehension. "Let's change the subject."

Truly's face lights up.

"We don't have to. For here comes someone who will change it for us." He points toward the iron gates and Lafayette street.

Curiously I turn to see a girl making her lone way across the courtyard. She pauses but for a second at Jesse and Jessalyn's table, exchanges greetings, then continues on.

"She's my girl," Truly says, his every ex-

pression beaming, or, I mistake it for that. "The one I have been telling you about."

She crosses the courtyard, by the cockatoos cage, through the maze of tables, smiles to this one and that, as if she knows them all, and to the corner of the bar where Truly and I stand.

"Don't tell me," she cries, holding out both hands. "This is Star, and no other."

"Either you are a sorceress or Truly's an expert at description," I mutter, somewhat out of breath, taken by her beauty. "You have named the man."

"So wonderful to meet you, Star," she assures, and there is about her smile that certain something which immediately conquors.

"And this, Star, is Dalas, my one and only," Truly introduces us, an arm reaching out to pull her closer to the bar and him. "The most hard hearted girl in Louisiana."

"You should know," she says. "You have certainly given me enough reasons."

"Have I?"

"How else can a girl's heart turn when she's been stranded as often as I. I feel like a female Robinson Crusoe."

Truly frowns. He has wanted to make a good first impression, and he palms it off by saying: "Baby—you know how busy I am all the time."

Her eyebrow goes up in mock disdain, but she laughs out loud.

"Indeed I know!"

Now they talk to one another in undertones, little private talk which advertises their inner emotions, and I study the two together. I am almost envious. They make a striking couple. Truly's natural warmheartedness and her haughty sophistication are perfect as a love team. Opposites always attract. I am almost glad he has picked a girl who is proud, straightforward, and I know she is this even on first sight. The way she walks, the rigid air with which she transports her body, the arch of her back, her head held majestically high, and not one of those demure helpless females which so typifies the epitome of the southern belle. This girl knows where she is going, and she knows how to get there.

Their little rendevous is snatched from them by the presence of three college-type boys who foollw after a foppish looking young girl, and Truly, impatiently, regretfully, turns to me.

"Do you think you could promise to be a gentleman if I permitted you to keep Dalas company while I take care of business matters for a while?"

"I promise nothing I cannot keep," I answer, kidding. We all laugh.

He strikes one hard fist against his out-

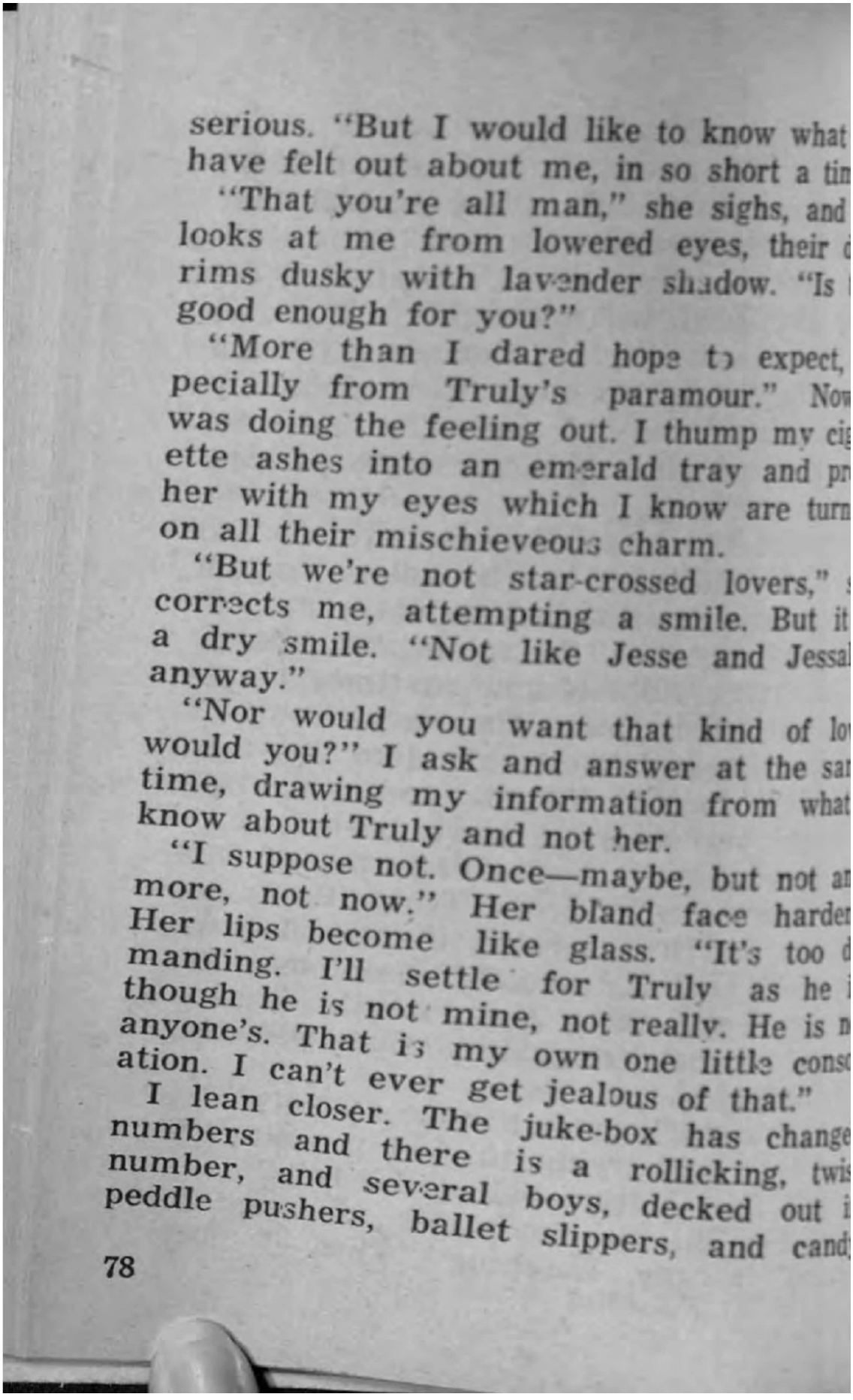
stretched palm with a loud crack." Someday, Star! Someday!"

He glides off down the bar with a trust in me that is bordered on recklessness, a trust I am certain he would not have bestowed upon any other man.

I ask Dalas if she would like to sit at a table. She nods. We find a place not too far from the juke-box, yet far enough away that we can talk and be heard. Thankfully, there is a slow moving number playing, and the mood of it correlates with mine. It makes things easy for me. I am not always at perfect ease with women, especially one who already belongs to another and my role becomes no more than that of chaperone. It lends nothing to the ambitions of the male, for he keeps his attitude in check and, knowing this full well, I have resolved to play the perfect gentleman.

When we are comfortably seated, she takes off her ski jacket, and lay her bronzed shoulders bare. Her white jump suit cuts a startling gash almost to her waist and I can see the deep hollow between her breasts. Corruptively, I wonder of Truly's fingers have caressed there. I should not think such things. Yet, at the very thought of it, tremors go through me like an electric volt.

"I realize this is the all too cosmopolitan question," she begins the conversation, her elbows propped on the table. "But never-



serious. "But I would like to know what
have felt out about me, in so short a tin
"That you're all man," she sighs, and
looks at me from lowered eyes, their
rims dusky with lavender shadow. "Is
good enough for you?"
"More than I dared hope to expect,
pecially from Truly's paramour." Now
was doing the feeling out. I thump my cig
ette ashes into an emerald tray and pr
her with my eyes which I know are turn
on all their mischieveous charm.
"But we're not star-crossed lovers," s
corrects me, attempting a smile. But it
a dry smile. "Not like Jesse and Jessa
anyway."
"Nor would you want that kind of lo
would you?" I ask and answer at the sa
time, drawing my information from what
know about Truly and not her.
"I suppose not. Once—maybe, but not an
more, not now." Her bland face harden
Her lips become like glass. "It's too d
manding. I'll settle for Truly as he i
though he is not mine, not really. He is n
anyone's. That is my own one little consc
ation. I can't ever get jealous of that."
I lean closer. The juke-box has change
numbers and there is a rollicking, twis
number, and several boys, decked out i
peddle pushers, ballet slippers, and candy

striped blouses are on the floor, their asses pivoting and swaying like little children doing the hoola-hoop. I fail to understand what she means, though this should be no concern of mine. This is her and Truly's world. Yet, I ask:

"How do you mean?"

She pauses for a moment of silence. She takes out a cigarette from a tiny, flat, white case. I light it for her with a platinum lighter gifted to me by—no! I must not think of her now! We sit for another moment without talking, as if we are listening to the music.

"Star," she begins, picking tobacco from her lips that have peeled off her cigarette. Then she goes on. "He is the kind of man, or person I should say, who I fully believe will never belong to anyone—yet he belongs in some way to everyone. He gives a little of himself to everyone he meets and comes in contact with, but he never gives all of himself to any one person. I hope you understand me right."

I nod that I do. I am profoundly interested.

"Now take Jesse and Jessalyn, they are swallowed up in each other. They have excluded everything in the world with the exception of themselves and the love they have for one another. Nothing else matters to them. Nothing else exists. They are de-

nying everything, sacrificing everything just that they might have the other. And, of course, they will exhaust their love, strangle it finally, choke it out of existence, or else it will end in tragedy. But this could never happen to Truly. He does not throw himself into anything too wholeheartedly. And this worries me, Star. I am deeply concerned over it, though I dare not bring it up to him. We all have our own little suit of armour which we wear to protect ourselves — our true selves— from the brutality of the world, to keep secret that little something about us we had rather die than to reveal. You have one. I have one. And all these people in here have one. And Truly has one too, but I cannot find it. His suit of armour is thick and he is well protected within it. But somewhere there is a screw loose, despite his loving nature, despite his spontaneous attitude with everyone else. Behind that perfect hautier something lurks, some monster that he dares not permit to come out into the open, into the light of full day. He keeps it under lock and key, and even the key is hidden."

"My—but you dig deep," I say, when she is finished. "You should take up head shrinking."

"You're angry because you think I have said something unkind about Truly."

"No I'm not," I assure her, and I wink. "I understand."

"I would not care if you were angry," she says surprisingly. For I would realize that you liked him, and I want you to like him, Star. You are good for him. He speaks of you all the time."

"I do like him," I say, laying my hand on her arm, and my eyes tell her this is true. "Now let's hush about him, for here he comes."

"There's not a jealous bone in my body," he sings, as he prances toward us, "but I shake like a skeleton just the same."

He has brought us a drink and sits them on the table. He bends and lays his hand across his heart. "The compliments of the most handsome, the most dashing male in the Black Lamp," he says dramatically, then kisses her on the cheek. "How's my little Geishi doing?"

"That's a switch," she murmurs, pushing him away. He bites her fingers. "The other night I was your little Fraulien."

"We travel fast, baby!"

"Yeah!" she retorts. "Good-bye snails — turtles here we come!"

"My—but your bite is big tonight."

He straightens to his full height, his happy go lucky expression punctuated by his bright dark eyes which blaze under the scarlet carriage lamp next to us.

"Business is booming tonight!" he gl
surveying the crowd. I notice now that p
tically every table is filled, that the ba
stampeded like a chow line, and many
standing between the lounge and the co
yard, mimicing, twisting to the rhythm
the juke-box, their hands slicing the air
the constant beat of drum and guitar. He
are thrust together like a football hud
smoke screens groups into individual sp
trums of gaiety, giggles and yells and cat
to expressions rent the air, each seperate
like amplifiers strung across the dome.
multi-colored hyriad of hues splash
shoulders of the crowd like an abstra
painting. The light of inhaled cigarettes st
the darkness like tiny animal eyes.

"Where is Boots?" I ask Truly, sudden
intoxicated by it all, so absorbed in my co
versation with Dalas I had failed to noti
"I thought she was coming." I had be
eager to ask Dalas this question but h
been reluctant to do so. Long since, I ha
learned never to display the slightest inte
est in another woman while in the presen
of another, whether she was your mothe
your sister, your sweetheart, or your wif
So I spared Dalas her moment of humili
tion by asking this to Truly.

"Any minute now, hot pants," he answe
nudging me with an elbow. "She comes lat

and stays late—that's Boots, eh, Dalas?"

"She's a night owl alright," she agrees, "But Boots is Boots, and that is the only way I know how to describe her."

"I've got to go now, my two lovely people," Truly says slowly, his voice ebbing to a sigh, as if he painfully regrets to leave us. "There's a five dollar customer at the bar, and here I stand idling my time away talking to a couple of two-bit ones." He slaps me on the back, gives Dalas a light peck, and meanders through the crowd, eager hands reaching out to pinch him on the ass as he goes through.

Somebody has deliberately turned up the juke-box and the streams of music crashes through the lounge like a tornado. Cymbals and drums rent the darkness, and there is a crazy shuffling of feet, of moving bodies, o fwild arms flung out into anarchy.

Mr. Beverly and Gaston are worming their way through the dancers, and they take the table behind us, which has been shuffled to one side, almost abreast of us, and Gaston's elbow nudges my shoulder blades. There is a skinny youth with them in tight blue jeans and a stetson hat, its brim rolled into a curl on each side of his head, cowboy fashion, and his crudeness, his callowness, is a vivid contrast to Mr. Beverly's skipper blue blazer and enormous lavender cuff links. This dirty looking boy is his date and

Gaston, dateless, tries to draw my atte
Again, his boney elbow scrapes across
shoulder. I ignore it. I lean forward. D
has noticed and she smiles. I take a q
gulp of my vodka. I relish its fire. I can
Truly's blond head beyond the bar, betw
the mob of heads and the mirror, as if
is in an isle of prancing, twitching ni
marish faces. Dalas has a serious, not to
terested expression. I dare to draw her
on her favorite subject, and there is so
thing I have got to know.

"Do you love him?" Then, on seco
thought I say, "Or is this a too personal
question?"

She looks at me like a cat at a mou
hole.

"The only thing personal about it is—
well, that I could love him, but I don't. I
up to him."

"In what way?" I gather the courage
probe further.

"If he would make love to me, real lov
to me, show me that he is a man, like h
shows everybody else. I must know this
Every woman must know this about he
man."

"Is this so important?"

"Hell yes, it's important. I want to know
that I am a woman. And I want him to
show this to me, want him to prove just how
much woman I am and can be."

She jerks up her drink, takes an enormous swallow, callous, as a man will do. It is most unbecoming of her. The gesture has been deliberate. A false gesture. This is not her way. She sits the glass down again. The water beneath it splatters like a bomb. She does not notice.

"I bet you go into everything wholeheartedly," I say, pouring oil on the flaming waters.

She jerks up her head. "What do you mean by that?"

I compose a smile. I know it is a hateful smile. "That, like Jesse and Jessalyn, you give to everything you got."

"Go to hell!" she rasps. I am villaineously amused.

"Not unless you come with me," I add.

She glares up at me through her long shroud of dark hair, and her eyes, suddenly, are like one of the witches in Macbeth.

"We're in hell," she utters, raking over her words. "In this bar, in this gang of freaks!" She eyes our surroundings, as if blinded by the twitching forms, the men in girlish attire, girls in mannish fashions, some of them in jeans, brogans and leather jackets, their tasseled heads unkept, their puffy, masculine faces unpainted, their fingers soiled, broken, gnarled, dirty.

Through the maze, his face no higher than the line of tight pantsed asses on either side

of him, comes a tiny figure of a man – boy, I cannot tell. He is no taller than fo feet, as small as a child, but nicely propo tioned, his naked arms full and veine thickly muscled, his chest thrust forwar his waist so small I could span it with m hands. His hair is jet black, and is brushe up balboa fashion to the top of his fore head where, like sea waves, it comes to su and flows back over his intense blue eye

"Have you seen that before?" Dalas ask coming out of her doldrums.

I shake my head, watch him curiously until he disappears through the vacillatin mob.

"That's Wee Willie, a regular patron t this house of iniquity." Her voice scoffs, rid icules in a way I loathe intensely. "One o the boys—eh—I mean girls."

"That's his prerogative," I say, a bit hate fully, edging her on.

"It all reminds me of a story I once read," she begins, taking a long lanquid draw from her cigarette. She watches th smoke curls as they twine into a halo. She blows through the circle.

I overhear Mr. Beverly say to the drug store cowboy.

"If you slept with that nose to nose your toes would be in it, and if you slept with it toes to toes your nose would be in it!" The cowboy slaps himself on the legs and

roars outrageously.

"I'd sleep with it," I hear Gaston murmur, as if he has conquered the gaes. "Dear me—I'm no size queen!"

Mr. Beverly comes back sarcastically. No, Mabel, you're not. You'll take any ole size."

The cowboy laughs again. Somehow I feel he is unaware of his circumstances.

"It was a story about an abandoned castle in Scotland," Dalas continues. I lean further her way in order to hear her above the noise of shuffling dancing feet and the juke-box, which is well on its way into "He Needs Me" by now. To this enormously slow cadence, boys are holding boys close on the floor, girls are dancing snuggly with other girls. "It is a terribly dark and lonely place, far out on the mores, and life, all life has deserted it. An evil place of no inhabitation, the story says. Then a traveling thief takes shelter in it from the rain, then another, then another. A man with one leg comes. A blind woman. A giant, a dwarf, then on and on, each taking his or her home there, and they telling others of their kind. Finally, the castle becomes an asylumn for the freaks of Scotland. To me, though I would die before I would let Truly know I said it, this lounge, this Black Lamp bar is that Scottish castle. They all come here sooner or later—every freak in Baton Rouge—even

in their so called normality they come, wh
to me are the sickest of all. For why do
come here? Tell me? Why do I come her
and you—and men like Truly—why?"

I think before I answer. My eyes, burnin
from cigarette and cigar smoke, scan th
horizon of faces, dim faces, vague face
faces I have seen a hundred times here i
this bar, and new faces I have not seen u
til tonight. Then I spy the face of Rowd
against the nightmarish storm of bobblin
faces. He sits alone. I know he has see
me. His face is turned ni the position of
profile from where I sit, eclipsed by th
amber gold of a carriage lamp beyond an
slightly above him, and all he has to do t
see me is to move his eyeballs but slightly
That clean, young, healthy, athletic boy
Why is he here? It is like asking why doe
man love beauty. It is a blind man's ques
tion.

"I don't know," I answer finally, but my
eyes are on Rowdy, not her. For seeing him
here amid all these others punctuates her
question and causes answering it all the
more baffling. And I say again: "I just don't
know, Dalas, why they come, why we come.
Something draws us. Irealize something
draws me. What, I do not know. Perhaps I
will never know. But it does and it does no
good to worry about it. I feel that as long
as I come here yet keep my morals, my

standards, then hell! What the harm?"

I try to shrug the situation off by the shrug of my shoulders. It isn't that easy. And I realize, though I hate to admit it to myself, let alone to anyone else, that there is something within me, some untold, unnamed thing that dictates to me, that conjures me, that may in time conquer and master me. Yet now, at this early stage, it does not frighten me. Perhaps I am safe, supreme, in knowing that nothing will ever change my physical desires.

I think of her. Her golden hair is like the amber lamp which halo's Rowdy's head. I get up quickly.

"I'm going to the juke-box," I say absently, dismissing myself from the table. I do not bother to look back to check how she is taking it. Actually, I do not give a damn. She's Truly's girl, not mine. Let him look after her. I'm no damn wet nurse.

At the juke-box, I cram a quarter into the slot. My eyes scan the blazing blocks of light. I want to play "Broken Promises", but my hand is reluctant to push the buttons. They slide over the number. I push anything, take up my quarter. I return to the table.

"Find your number?" she asks meakly. I shake my head. Yet no sooner than I had done so my number begins to play. Sonofabitch! I cry under my breath. Some bas-

tard's pushed it! Dumbly, I wonder if I h
pushed it accidently, or had my fingers i
stinctively found the right keys, though m
brain had said no.

"Broken words—broken promises—I'll a
ways love you—and I still do!"

The words burn in my brain like hot iron
I gulp my drink. I do it the same way Dala
had done moments before. I refuse to loo
at her.

"I like that," she whispers, humming th
tune. Her fingers keep time on the tabl
top.

"I hate it!" I declare, placing emphasis
on the word hate. My eyes draw in to nar
row slits.

"You must have loved her very much,"
she says, baiting me purposely, I know. "To
hate such a beautiful song."

"Yeah! Just like Truly loves you," I
answer. This is a cruel thing to say. I re
pent in my mind for having said it.

"Okay—so I had it coming," she apolo
gizes. She lays her hand over mine. It is
warm and I tremble oddly. I look up. Every
vein in my body is leaping, and they pour
through my eyes toward her. I see her
flinch. They strike home. Minutes pass. We
are still looking. I lift my hand and fold it
over hers. This madness of noise, of music,
of dancing, of shifting bodies, like ghosts
moving through vari-colored shadows, in-

toxicates me. Desire flows through my body. I move my thighs. It's been so long since I've had a woman. God! If only I had a woman tonight.

"If only you were not Truly's girl," I whisper longingly. Even my lips are on fire. I am breathing like a chinese dragon.

"You are forgetting Boots," she says, and lets out a faint, regretful sigh.

"How can I forget someone I have never seen," I cry back at her. "She's not coming. You know she's not coming."

She drops her eyes. She looks hurt. She looks at me. She wants me. I know she wants me. Every man knows that instantly in a woman. It is the most visible, the most obvious thing on earth.

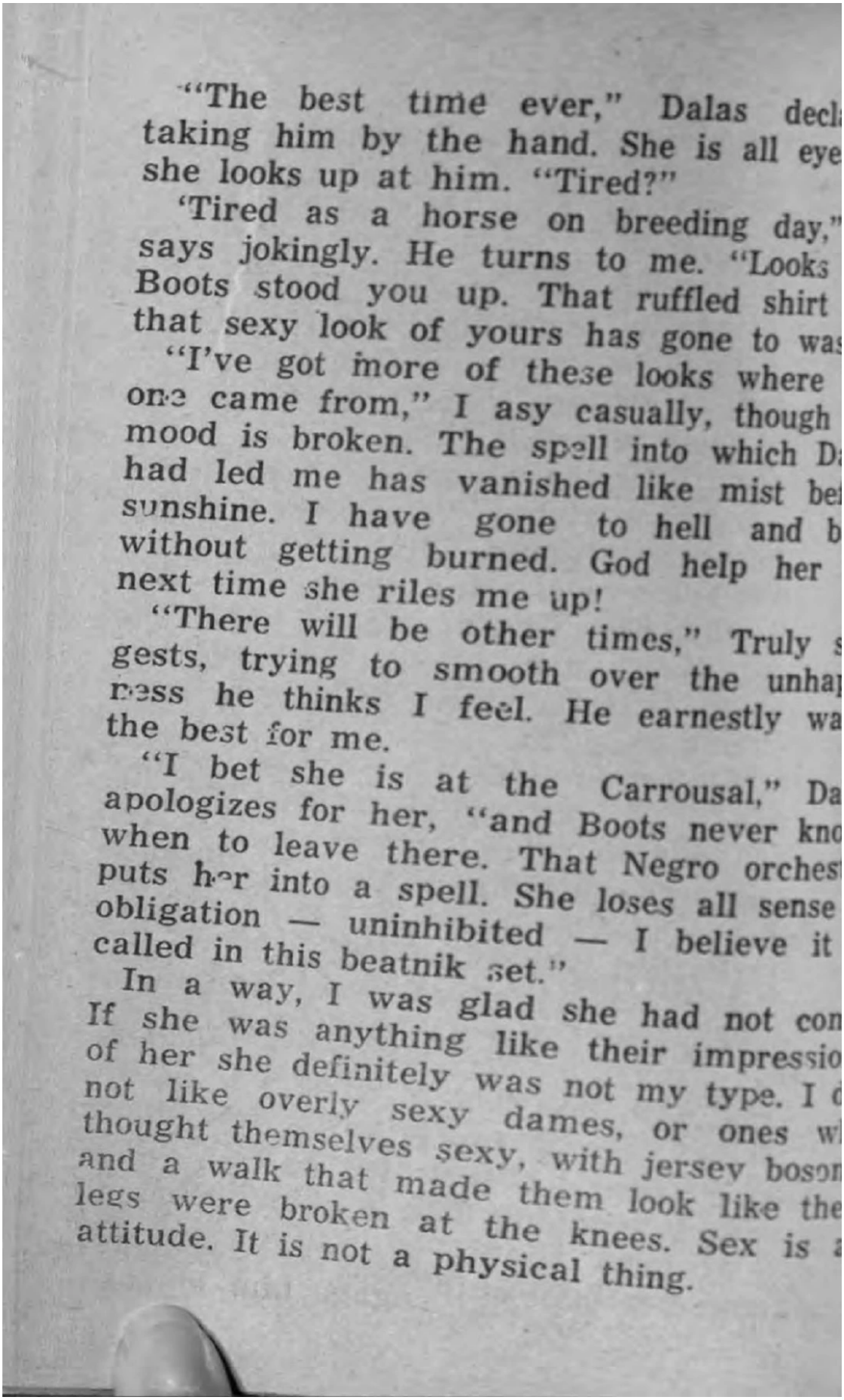
"Let's get out of here," I whisper, pulling her close. "Go somewhere—anywhere—but here. You said you hated it."

She withdraws her hand. There is a faint hint of a smile on her lips. Her shadowy eyes are flooded with mischief.

"And what's all this you said a moment ago about your morals and your principles?"

"To hell with that!"

"A drink for my favorite people," comes a voice so near, I feel its warmth. It is Truly. He is grinning like a saint. "You all having a good time? If you're not, I'm gonna run you both outa here."



"The best time ever," Dalas decl
taking him by the hand. She is all eye
she looks up at him. "Tired?"

'Tired as a horse on breeding day,"
says jokingly. He turns to me. "Looks
Boots stood you up. That ruffled shirt
that sexy look of yours has gone to wa

"I've got more of these looks where
one came from," I asy casually, though
mood is broken. The spell into which D
had led me has vanished like mist be
sunshine. I have gone to hell and b
without getting burned. God help her
next time she riles me up!

"There will be other times," Truly s
gests, trying to smooth over the unha
ness he thinks I feel. He earnestly wa
the best for me.

"I bet she is at the Carrousal," Da
apologizes for her, "and Boots never kn
when to leave there. That Negro orches
puts her into a spell. She loses all sense
obligation — uninhibited — I believe it
called in this beatnik set."

In a way, I was glad she had not co
If she was anything like their impressio
of her she definitely was not my type. I
not like overly sexy dames, or ones w
thought themselves sexy, with jersey boso
and a walk that made them look like the
legs were broken at the knees. Sex is
attitude. It is not a physical thing.

"It doesn't matter, I am having a wonderful time just the same," I say deliberately, in order to make them feel better about it. They had tried. That was enough for me. Actually, I blamed myself. I should have gotten my own date. I could have gone somewhere else. I did not have to come to this bar. But—that old sixty four dollar question comes back again. Why do I come in here?

I shrug off the numerous, unpleasant perplexes and display my most compromising smile. I realize it is my greatest working asset.

Truly thinks I am pleased, and there is that about his features which makes me think I am having a good time too. He knows how to make a person feel wanted, needed, even without saying a word. He just looks at you, that's all, and your notions start switching. Now I realize that he is too good for Dalas. She does not deserve him. And I am determined to let her know that I know this.

I've got to go again, baby," he whispers to her, gripping her naked shoulders. "And you, pepper-pants, be careful how you treat my girl." He says this to me, sticks out his tongue, then moves quickly through the crowd. I watch him go. He does not tarry to converse with the numerous effeminate young men who try and engage him in con-

versation. It is so obvious that all of the want him—are desperate to have him, a in any way that they can, get him. I belie they would settle for just being seen wi him, if for no other reason than to mak the others maliciously envious. Since m stay in Baton Rouge, I have learned on absolute thing about such men. They ar all rivals. They smoulder with a deepl seated jealousy, with an envy that is almos rage, and on occasion, they do not care t hide this weakness.

"Well—where were we at when we were interrupted," Dalas speaks first, and her painted eyes are saying many things that she, nor anyone else, could mould into words.

She obviously thinks I am some kind of silly fool.

"I forget," I answer deliberately, for I know this dart into her ego will sting.

She flinches. Her eyes suddenly blaze like hot glass. She toys with her drink, her cigarette making lazy patterns of blue smoke between us.

"Well—having been cad enough to say it!" She grinds her cigarette butt in the emerald ashtray. This is an old trick with women. I had learned it at an early age, for I had been screwing them since I was fifteen. They lead you to bed, get you into the mood, then go cold, and later, if you

do not come on with them again they will bring up the subject, in a casual way of course, then again, damn you, if you don't comply—if you don't eat out of their hand like some knid of trained lap dog.

"You may leave off your virginal airs," I say to her icly, and I keep my eyes steadily on hers. I watch them dance. I watch them as they mirror her soul. She senses now that I am different from other men, yet in a way that she likes, and her feminine ego is deflated. Had I eaten out of her hand like the others, perhaps, or maybe even Truly, she would have liked me less. I am infuriating her by degrees and she is coming back for more. Like all women basically, she believes she has to triumph over men.

"Are you like this with all women?" she asks after a moment's hesitation, turning her eyes to a group of girls who are wearing shorts, gaudy jerseys, and high-heeled boots who are coming into the lounge by way of the long tiled passageway.

"Only to those who regard me as you do," I answer her, my eyes too following the squad of girls who, to me, are the picture of young health and good looks. They appear too young to be in this bar.

Someone yells:

"San Quentin quail!"

Now I know they are too young!

"And—how is this that I regard you
she ask quietly, a little taken back by
frankness. It is not men's usual way w
women. It is easier to lie to them than
tell the truth.

I come back readily: "As you rega
Truly. You say he does not make you f
like a woman. Hell—that's your fault. I s
that now. You turn him on and off like
faucet. No man is physically equipped
toy with like that. And you do this just f
the pleasure in it for you to watch hi
squirm."

"Oh, is that so!" Her eyes snap.

"And I have the presumption that he lon
since has tired of this monotonous foo
drudgery, and has built up this wall yo
call a suit of armour. And that, my dea
brings me to my point. You have give
away yours—your suit of armour I mean.
have found you out."

Her eyes are tear rimmed, but I pretend
not to notice.

"So—my Mr. Star!"

I continue, which serves as proof that
man kills the thing he loves. "I do not know
the scientific term for you, Dalas, but I
have my own term—or what I would call
you."

"Then say it!" She is aflame now. Her
eyes tremble like a rattler's. The fire with-
in her is all but consuming her.

"You are a Nympo-sadist!"

Something electric snaps through the air. In an instant, she is on her feet. One hand, dangling with the white ivory bracelets, still rests on the table, her long tapered nails but touching the surface, and she is frozen there, paralyzed in that obviously godless posture, rigid as marble, opaque as a shadow.

"At such a remark," she finally says, speaking between clenched teeth, her eyes, narrow slits. "I have no alternative but to leave you sitting here, even though you are a SO-CALLED GUEST of Truly's. And, I should tell him what you've said. Why—he'd draw and quarter you!"

"I think not," I say brazenly, cock-sure of my ultimatum. "So go ahead and tell him. He'll no doubt praise me for it."

"Oh! men!" she leaves like a small fury. She forgets her pequin ski jacket, remembers, reaches back swiftly, jerks it from the back of the chair with enough force to rip it to shreads, then storms in and out among the standing patrons, her jacket flaring up behind her like a Matador's cape.

She was mad, but she had asked for it. I sit quietly, puff on a fresh cigarette and spasmodically sip my Vodka. I do not try to search her out amidst the mob. I have no intentions of apologizing. I have grown to loathe women who flaunt their sex in a

man's face. Just because they have g
crack!

I feel Gaston's elbow in my shou
blade and I shift my chair so that he
not touch me.

"You think I've got venerial disease
something?" he rasps, his darkly pain
eyes demoniacal, fiendlike. "The ego of
ists!"

I see Rowdy staring at me and this le
me a plausable excuse.

"I am trying to catch the eye of some
I know," I lie, "and I am out of range
his view where I was."

"Oh dear! cruising eh?" Gaston cries, g
gling viciously. "If that's the young boy y
want who is sitting at that table alone, t
one next to those squaw-faced dykes, th
it's going to take some cruising. Eve
queen in Baton Rouge is cruising th
beautiful child!"

"I don't want him," I say, defending m
self, my manhood, not degrading Rowdy.

Mr. Beverly turns in his seat like a prin
adonna.

"Gaston! if you had one tenth the se
appeal that Star's got, you'd parade dow
main street naked trying to sell it!"

Gaston glares like a madman.

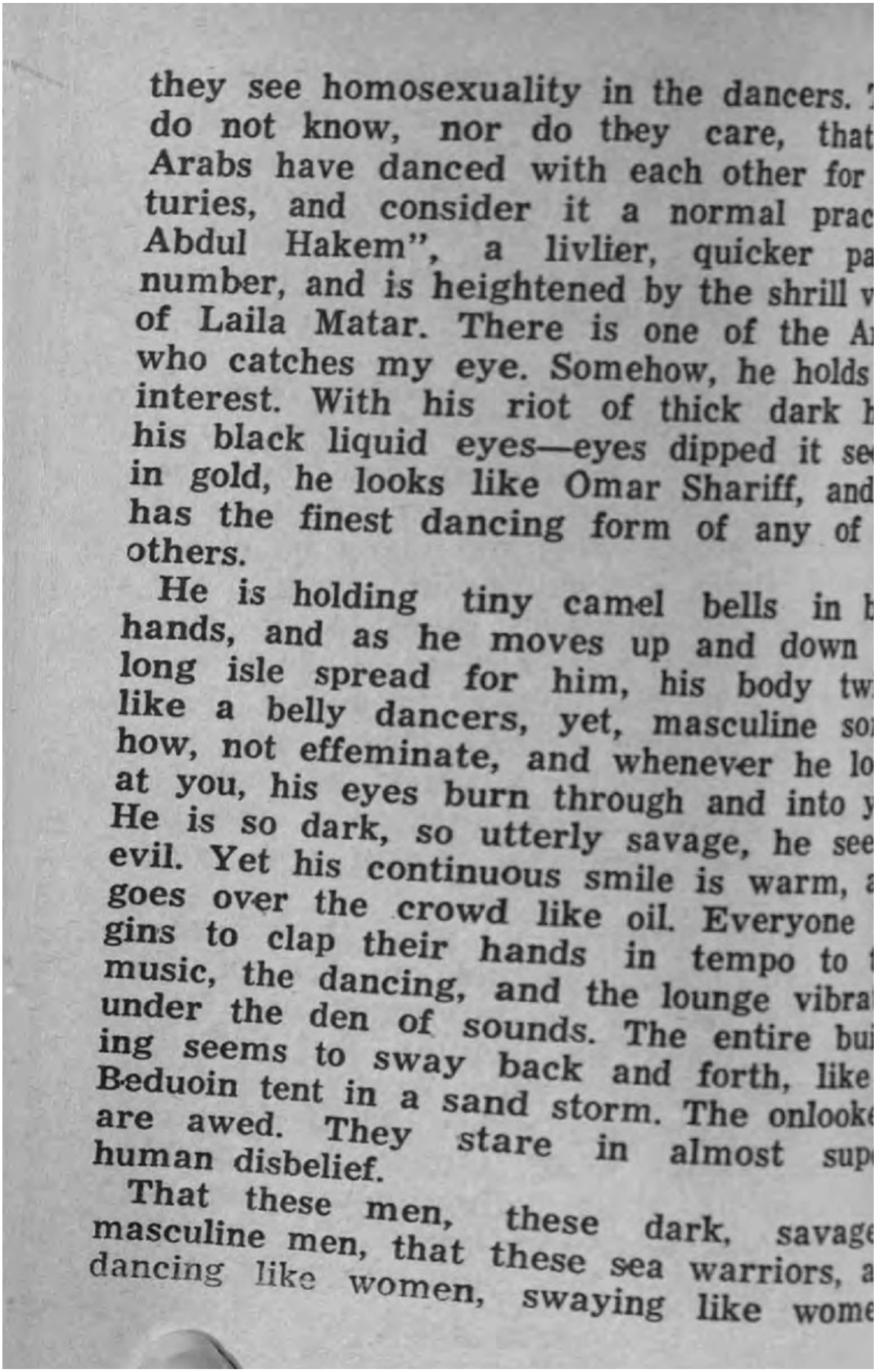
"You give me the red ass, Hettie!"

"That's not what gives you the red ass
dear!"

The cowboy chuckles gleefully, though more from beer I think than from what Mr. Beverly has just asid. I still am certain he is not yet aware of his partner's intentions. He's that stupid. Mr. Beverly is playing dangerously. That akwardly built, but bull-strong boy could push him through the walls.

There is a thundering ovation. Through the courtyard comes a motly group of young men, rakish looking in fact. They are followed and surrounded by an entourage of college-type youths who, obviously have encountered them elsewhere at some other lounge, and are escorting them to this bar. The rakish young men are Arabs, from one of the ships in the harbor. In one of their arms is a portable record player, and another one is carrying a stack of records. With that, anyone can ascertain that they do not appreciate American music and must bring their own.

The crowds disperse to give them room. The record player is set on one of the tables. The juke-box is unplugged, and from the player pours the solemn, but rythmic "Ahlan Wa Sahlan". The Arabs begin to dance, and with each other. Their dance is as old as Arabia itself, but to these people I can see, to these effeminate American men who are watching them, who through the eyes of their own homosexuality think



they see homosexuality in the dancers. T
do not know, nor do they care, that
Arabs have danced with each other for
turies, and consider it a normal prac
Abdul Hakem", a livlier, quicker pa
number, and is heightened by the shrill v
of Laila Matar. There is one of the A
who catches my eye. Somehow, he holds
interest. With his riot of thick dark h
his black liquid eyes—eyes dipped it se
in gold, he looks like Omar Shariff, and
has the finest dancing form of any of
others.

He is holding tiny camel bells in h
hands, and as he moves up and down
long isle spread for him, his body tw
like a belly dancers, yet, masculine so
how, not effeminate, and whenever he lo
at you, his eyes burn through and into y
He is so dark, so utterly savage, he see
evil. Yet his continuous smile is warm, a
goes over the crowd like oil. Everyone
gins to clap their hands in tempo to t
music, the dancing, and the lounge vibra
under the den of sounds. The entire bui
ing seems to sway back and forth, like
Beduoin tent in a sand storm. The onlooke
are awed. They stare in almost sup
human disbelief.

That these men, these dark, savage
masculine men, that these sea warriors, a
dancing like women, swaying like wome

pivoting their arms high above their heads like women, their torsos swaying like women, yet them so coarse, so bizarre of physique and dress, is too much!

Some of the men merge into the isle with the Arabs, to be near them, to touch them, to feel the pulsating rythms the Arabs must feel under the magiv, haunting spell of the music from Cairo. I recognize Faire and Elfa amid them, their tiny girlish figures (and you cannot call them anything else but figures) silhoutted against the blaring amber carriage lamps. Their white hari gleams like a mop of pearls, and their skin-tight levi's (snow white) look phosphorous. They are like fairies from "A Midsummer's Night Dream". Their smallness, their daintiness against the primeaval savages with whom they are dancing is so contrasting as to lose its definition. The Arabs seem not to mind. In fact, I believe they think the two, actual girls. Their smiles are spontaneous, their gestures come-hither, and occasionally their bodies go together: ass to ass, crotch to ass, and crotch to crotch. If the Arabs sense an invasion of their masculinity, they are not giving signs of it. Like Faire and Elfa, their bodies give free of its emotions, unleashed to all abandon except the dancing and the wild, intangible music.

A dark shadow comes between them and me, and I am torn out of my observations

by the bulky forms of two husky both young males, who merge tow They are followed by a buxom bl who could never attain the rudim beauty, no matter how she might t she is not ugly. Like the two boys panying her, she is attired in leather motorcycle jacket, a Germ military cap, and black leather boots. While they wear ridiculousl levis she wears a black leather skirt huge black purse, almost the size of bags, which she has carelessly flun one shoulder.

The two boys, without so much as a nod or grin, flip their leg over the of two empty chairs and sit down. Th slumps down like a piece of moulding

"I'm Boots," she says timidly, ap ing. "Sorry I'm late, but Jetta and here just wouldn't think of my leavin Candlelight so soon. This is Jetta,' points from one to the other, "and t Buster, pals of mine eh, Mister Star- gone cats though."

"I'm sure they are," I say, a little sh at their crudeness. Shocked at all of actually, and I wonder how Truly could ever drawn the deduction that I might up with a girl like this over-blown m cycle Moll. With one glance at her, I see that she doesn't have the first elem

of taste, and that her two companions are as base as life-prisoners. One of them, the one she calls Jetta, is marred by a multitude of pimples on his face, and his eyes have a certain shiftiness that makes him about as trustworthy (I think) as an ape on a tissue-paper leash. And the other one —who could be somewhat good looking, if he would dress correctly, is belligerent. His eyes are dark. They sparkle wickedly, and there is a cock-sure expressoin on his face that would dispel both friend and enemy alike. He has not kept his eyes off me from the instant the ysat at my table, and now, with his arms folded, a cigarette thrust between thick, saliva dripping lips, lpis that are pouty, sullen, he still looks. He nudges me on the elbow with his. His breath smells of hard liquor.

"Say, Cat! You one of them guys over there?"

I get his point readily.

"An Arab?" I ask back, stretching out his implication.

He laughs, or rather grunts. He cocks his head to one side, in the direction of the bar where at least fifty young men are crowded, one body against another's. "Them girl-boys, I'm talking about, you one of them kinda guys?"

"Are you looking for one?" I ask calmly. I do not blink an eye. His head jerks back.

He has not expected this kind of re
Boots and the pimple-faced boy lau
self conscious laugh. I can see the
afraid of this one called Buster.

He is still looking at me. His sharp
are going over my coat, my shirt, my
links, and he picks up my right hand
examines my ring.

"I do not like for boys to play with
hands," I say lowly, sounding as ca
yet as seriously as I can.

He retrieves his hand like the reco
of a rattler. There is venom in his
Self-indignation is written like flame on
face. "Smart mother!" he says, his b
eyes scintilating toward Boots, then J
"Just, just admiring your ring, Cat!
hunk of silver you got there. Hell, can
guy admire somebody's ring without b
considered queer?"

"I suppose one can," I come back ta
for I did not relish the idea of the thre
my table. "And as well, I suppose one
come in here without being a girl-boy,
you call them."

His lower jaw drops.

"Okay! Okay! Pal," he rasps, thrust
out his hands, his fingers spread wide, M
lon Brando fashion. "I get the idea, so ok
let's cool it. I made a mistake. So—I m
a mistake. You got my vote."

I answer him by turning my attention

Boots.

"How did you know I was Star?"

"Truly pointed you out to me when we first came in," she cries obscurely, her saucer eyes casing every male present. "But I think I would have recognized you anyway after what Truly has said about you, especially by that little tattooed star just below your right eye. I've never seen another one like it. It's the most!"

Buster grabs my arm. His face has mellowed somewhat but his eyes are still incredulous, almost wickedly resentful of everything there is about me. He knows I fel superior and that gnaws at him.

"How come you got that tattoo, Star?" his question is more of ridicule than of curiosity. "You don't belong to no gang I know, some kind of sex cult maybe—or prison. Did you get it in prison?"

"I am an artist by trade," I say to him, ignoring his inexpedient expression, "and I sign my paintings with a star. It also signifies my name."

"An artist—eh," he grunts. "Oh I know. Boots already told me, but I woulda know'd you was something like that—them fancy clothes and all. Dig this cat." He looks at Jetta and points a blunt thumb at me. "But suppose the fuzz picks you up. With that neon sign on you rface your a dead give away. What if you got in trouble?"

My eyes dart at him like tiny dagger
"I don't plan on getting into trauble."
I add, "I have nothing to hide."
His brow wrinkles, and his cap goes l
a half an inch. His eyes snap voracio
"Friend of the fuzz—eh?"
Boots leans forward, her melon bre
resting on the table, her long strands of
blond hair draping over her round shoul
like sea hemp.
"Why don't you two stop umbling e
other," she cries, tapping fidgety fingers
the ashtray. "We came here to have
You know what Truly told me. Star's
money—a famous artist. Remember,
promised me at the Carrousel you'd b
me if I'd cut you in!"
"Shut your trap!" Buster roars, slapp
her across the face. She lets out a dis
whimper. His beady eyes dart at m
quiver there, their glow lustrous, raven
The record player is playing "Laka Ar
Wasatalein" and numerous other Bl
Lamp patrons have joined in since I
took notice. Even Mr. Beverly is am
them, not dancing but standing goggle-e
at the husky, good-looking Arabs, and G
ton is making a brave attempt at being
resplendent dignitary. He waves his l
arms in an X shape above his head, ap
the Arabians. His head is reared back l
a band major's, and the long cigarette he

holding from a glittering holder is creating weird blue veils in the darkness, like the super-natural handwriting on the wall.

I turn away. I battle swiftly within my mind which of the two is worse: those men dancing to music intended only for warriors of the fiercest mettle, or these three insensible, superficial idiots staring at me like a calf at slaughter time. Surprising, I see Rowdy standing near the rear wall. He is watching me. I swallow hard. Something, some mysterious incrimination seizes me, as though, by keeping company with these unscholarly street-urchins I have spoiled something of myself in his young, innocent eyes.

I leap from the table. I crush my cigarette into the ashtray. Buster reaches out imploringly nad takes me by the arm.

"Don't pay any attention to what that broad said," he cries hoarsely. "Stay! We're not looking for loot—honest!"

I grit my teeth as my mind thinks of Rowdy. I jerk my arm away.

"Take your filthy hands off me — you crummy punk!" I half-shout, spitting out the words. Surprisingly, he releases me. He shrinks back. His eyes are like those of a resolute gangster. He starts to rise, his fists clinched. Boots pushes him back. Several people turn and stare.

"Let him go!" she yells, shameless. "He's

not like us! Truly said he's a gentle
Aimlessly, I push through the cro
overhear Buster yell to her as I slip th
the group of Arabs surrounding the
player:
"Why, you silly washed-up broad! D
know what a gentleman is?"
I do not wait to say good-night to
I hastily make my way to the row of
ico's where sits the cage of the cock
and out into the courtyard. Directly
is the low squatty man and the kid i
blue-jeans I had seen earlier at the
They are both drunk, the kid sagging ag
the pudgy belly of the fat man, his
head resting on his shoulder.
Dissolute, aberrant of all my princip
feel now, and striving desperately to r
them, I cross the courtyard hurri
neither looking to the right nor left in
of seeing someone I might have talke
ealier and would be intercepted to conv
further, and up the tunnel-dark stairs to
apartment.
I must be alone! I must, in my imper
drive to search out myself, to break
completely from all that I am not, I
be alone. Only through that solitude of a
ness can I hope to foil the unwhole
viciousness which is surrounding me,
ing me, dragging me down into the mir
this putrid dissipation.

I take a cold shower, and go to the window. The river is as calm as a basin. The dark ships sit upon it like placid kittens on a glassy sidewalk. They are dark, majestic, untroubled, and Port Allen beyond is like a great city seen ni the far-off distance.

I glance below where several people are coming out of the lounge by way of the tiled corridor. I notice a lone figure leaning against a streetlamp. He is looking up at my semi-lit window.

It is Rowdy.

CHAPTER FOUR

It is Sunday morning. I am sitting in the courtyard. I am dressed in plaid shorts and sandals, and the warm morning sun spreads over my naked outstretched legs, my chest, my arms, my forehead like the lips of a girl.

I have leaned my head back against the old, mortar cracked wall, my eyes are closed, and the sweat is running down beneath my arm-pits and down my thighs in streams, draining from my being the poison of drink the night before. I feel reborn, washed clean. The bells at St. Joseph's cathederal are ringing, calling in the wroshipers for ten o'colck mass, and that too has a purifying sound, so remote, so unbigoted from last night's reign of dissipation.

I open my eyes a crack.

In the balm of this utterly quiet day, unusually so, for the heart of a city, I absorb every fiber of its reality.

Across the courtyard I see Truly feeding the cockatoos, his hands thrust into the cage, and filled with bread crumbs which they are gulping up like frightened wild things. And I think: why should they fear him? Truly—the most tender of souls. Yet, even in their fright, they are permitting him to rub back their splendid plumes with his forefinger. I think of the sandpipers in Monterey which can be hypnotized like that.

Now and then, Truly unconsciously turns from his task and gazes at me with squinted eyes. His red lips curl from that squint, and with his oily blond hair tumbling over his forehead, there is a recklessness about him, a sense of adventure, intrigue, mischief. Perhaps, I imagine, it is because of Dalas who is sitting on a stone bench on the opposite end of the courtyard. I am certain they have slept together last night. They have that contented warmth of fulfillment which always follows on the afterglow of sex. I hope he has made her feel like a woman! God! she needs that.

On one of the tables, sits a record player they have no doubt brought from Truly's home on Plank Road, and beside it sits a

hamper of food and wine for a noon da picnic. I am sure they will invite me to jo them. The record player is on, and is playi one of Truly's favorite albums, the hig pitched songs of Yma Sumac, and she singing the haunting "Legend of the Su Virgin." It tears out your heart. For as lon as I live, I will link my remembrance o Truly with that Incan voice. I hope someon remembers to play it at my funeral. It i the rhythm to which I would like to marc to on my way to paradise.

Dalas is occupying herself with a bit o sculptor, her nimble hands plying the ma roon clay like a dirt-dobber, her mind los in that unbreached valley of the masters Truly, lifting a flower bud here and there snapping off dead leaves, making believe a pruning, sidles and bridles his way towar me. I close my eyes. He is so near now, feel the warmth of his body, the magneti current of his physical self. In that instant he blocks out the sun. A shadow hangs over me.

"You are angry," he whispers lowly.

I open my eyes, as if surprised. He sits down on a bench opposite me, his thick legs spread diligently, the short hair on them like golden wheat.

"Of course not," I reply, not bothering to move from my position. "What makes you think that I am?"

He is bashfully silent for a moment.

"Oh, your attitude, I suppose," he says finally. He drops his eyes. They stare at the hot flagstones. "You didn't come by and say good-night when you left the lounge last night."

I sit up slightly. This oversight has bothered him.

"I am sorry," I apologize. I stare at his bowed head, at the crisp gold curls which coil in struggling ringlets. Does he really care—care this much? I try to think of some plausible excuse.

"It's just that I didn't feel well, and the crowd, those Arabs, those—those silly men!"

He laughs softly. His blue eyes dart my way, then to the stone.

"I'll buy that," he says, still looking down, as if he is counting the grains of sand in the stones. "It gets rather mushy at times, like trying to walk through molasses. Everything wants to stick to you—or (he laughs again) stick into you."

They're after you alright," I add casually. "How do you manage to keep them at bay?"

"It's not so difficult, with me that is," he murmurs. "I guess it is because I own the place and they know I will throw them out and ban them from coming back if they get too fresh with me."

"I guess I will never understand them," I say truthfully. And I knew instinctively

that I wouldn't, no matter how hard I might try. This was the first time I had ever come face to face with them, talked to them, putting up with their glib tongues and their insults. I had seen them, naturally, as most men had, on the west coast and in Florida, during the service in the Marines, but always from a spectator's point of view, not as a member. They had seemed as something ethereal, vague then, shadowy beings on the borderline of my world, never daring to enter it. And I add to this by saying: "They seem to lose so much, to leave out so much of life. They risk everything on a few moments of what they erroneously call a good time. They search fo rthat one little something, fail to find it really, but keep searching again, as though it is somewhere there in front of them, or just beyond them, just out of reach, and they continue to reach. It causes me to wonder if that something they want is really there—if it at all exists. I doubt if it does."

Truly looks at me. His eyes are deeply serious, reflective.

"Yes—I think it does exist, for them anyway. To a degree, they are like all the rest of us. They are searching for a friend, a loved one, a companion, someone like them, someone who trusts them and believes in them, yet knowing them utterly as they really are. What makes it so bad is that, with most of their relations, it is a one

sided affair. They have to pay in some way, either with money, a shower of gifts, favors which are both unwise and impractical, not to mention the paying by their own sacrifices. They endure humiliation, shame, loss of family and straight friends, their jobs, their positions, and jail, fines, and imprisonment. It should be a fifty-fifty relationship, but it rarely is. One gives, the other usually takes. This kind of set up wears on their nerves, makes them feel inferior, and hastens them on to some kind of tragic act in order to free themselves of it. Mainly, I think they destroy what they really seek. Even if they do happen to find what they want, the person I mean, they will attempt to destroy that in the end, for what they want is too much for their temperament, their logic, their conscience, and their pocket books."

I sit up straight and look at him. His impressions leads me on.

"What do they REALLY want out of life?" I ask seriously, loging to know, since the first moment I stepped into the Black Lamp.

Truly studies for a moment, his gaze beyond mine, the glitter in his eyes, a strange glitter, taking on a quality of which I had no knowledge. It was as if he was staring at something wonderously beautiful, but that was forever out of his reach.

"Mostly, Star, they want a friend—a lover

—but perhaps not always a lover. A genu
friend first, a lover second."

I look puzzled. I am puzzled. If what
says has meaning then it is like looking
an apple in a barrel of apples.

"Is this so difficult?" I ask, "finding
friend, when all around them are men li
themselves—men as anxious as they?"

His brow twists into a frown, and there
a worried expression on his face, a fa
which seems to look on doom and is bo
awed and terrified by that doom. He l
out a faint sigh.

"Star, it wouldn't be difficult for them,
it wasn't for the punks, the money snatch
ers, the rollers, the dirty little male prost
tutes, the pimps, the sweet little sour boy
the clean little dirty boys, and a hundre
other types I can name. How are the gays
to choose? These kids are so wise these days
to the gay life, not for their liking for it, but
for what they can get out of it for them-
selves. They know all the nagles, the ges-
tures, the come-on's. They're worse than
any woman with their sweet talk, their
come-hither looks, their bedroom eyes which
they can turn on at will, the tricks of know-
ing how to dress, the places to go, what to
say, what to do. I have seen them come
into the bar one night with the experience
of a veteran sailor, scoring everyone they

can, and acting gay as any faggot, and I have seen that same punk come in the very next night acting as innocent, as schoolboyish as a lamb. One night, they can act as if they have never been had, and they can act on the next night like the yhave gone down on everybody at the bar. They can be a faggot one evening and a football star the next, and the Gays are easily fooled. They think they are picking up a real boy, a kid fresh out of high school, a kid who is eager to go, and not until they discover that their billfolds, their watches, and their rings are missing and their names in the morning paper for contributing, do they wake up. And these kids squeal too, like stuck pigs! If someone takes the rap, it is the gay, not the kid, for he can go crying to his father and his father will do the rest. They can always say their under age, or that an older man persuaded them, and a thousand other little dirty excuses their shameless little minds can concoct." He pauses and looks away. His blue eyes are remorseful, irreclaimable. "Once, Star, I thought youth was the most beautiful, the most wonderous thing on earth. Now I know that youth is evil, decadent, corrupt. And they are that way because they have that youth as a shield to protect them. Their evil little hearts can go screaming to the high heavens when their little dirty butts are in

a jam and all the law in the world w
lieve them. I coud rattle off case afte
of gays who are in prison simply b
they befriended a punk. I have seen
stake everything they own, their prof
their reputation, their love of fami
some punk's tale that actually isn't
two cents, and I have seen them lo
that when the perverted little b
squeals. Kids gossip worse than old w
I wouldn't trust one, nor confide in o
more than I would sell out this count
the Russians. They, the rat-faced, villa
little shity-tailed punks are the evil ge
behind the tragedy, the unhappiness o
gay!"

His eyes are rimmed with tears, an
blniks them spasmodically, blaming i
the sun. I know now, at this moment,
something real, that something unseas
has touched him at sometime in his pa
know too, that it has been someone y
er, less spoiled by life than himself.
way I pity him, and my heart is touc
pricked by his tragedy which so
matches my own. We are closer now.
pasts are merging like two twin waves
rise and burst as surf.

"Punks like that Jetta and that Bust
I utter proudly, defending, in naming th
the vicious youth which had harmed
which had drudgingly intercepted his

piness. Whoever they were, I suddenly loathed them.

"Exactly!" he whispers profoundly, lifting his chin in an effort to ward off the reminder of his past. "I should have my ass kicked for telling Boots and those two punks where you were sitting. Stupid me! I know now why you are angry."

"Not angry, Truly. It's just that I wonder wh yyou thought I would be interested in that sort." It was out. I had put it bluntly.

He bows his head. His toes toy with a loose pebble along one of the flagstones. He watches intensely, as if expecting it to disappear. His body leans forward, his hands on the bench.

"It wasn't my doing altogether," he denies, but dreading to bring it to the surface. He squirms under his own ultimatum. "It was mostly Dalas." He turns and gazes in her direction. She is still lost in her stone and clay world. "She mentioned Boots as a date for you. Now I know why. She let it out last night. She said that I—that I talked about you so much, she wanted to get even. But she regrets it now, Star, truly she does. Why—even that piece of sculptoring is for you, a gift, the bust of the African."

I turn and gaze at her. She is bent over the red grotesque shape of clay, her long hair enshrouding her face, her lusty, downcast eyes. At the moment, she does not

even know we exist. The idea that sh
laboring for me softens my hardhear
ness toward her. And Truly, siphoning f
my loves, has told her about the Afri
head as a subject for me. I am deeply f
tered.

Truly continues, but his eyes are look
away toward the river and the ships. "
said that Boots would find out if I kn
what I was talking about—if you were rea
the man I keep saying you are. It w
wrong. I know. And you are our friend—a
those punks! Truly!"

I wave a hand in gesture.

"Forget it. What the hell! It's over a
done now. They won't come back. They kno
they don't belong."

"Don't brush them off so lightly," Tru
advises. "Those two have been there befor
But don't worry about them. I take care o
that, and any others like them—my job yo
know." Then he shrugs. "But Boots, that'
have to be your department. She digs you
Star."

"Then she'll have to find a better shovel
to dig with," I say truthfully, and I mean
this whole-heartedly. "For I don't DIG her
type. Too protomorphic for my well educa-
ted finese."

"You're right, of course," he agrees, "But
Boots isn't all bad, nor is she what she
really seems. An ignorant girl from an even

more ignorant family. She's remarkable, compared to her upbringing. And she is versatile, despite her lack of education. You met her in a bad light, and ni the company of those crab-assed punks. She can be anything she chooses to be, and according to who's she's with. She could converse with the President, sip tea with the Vanderbilts, or she can be a motorcycle broad. Boots is Boots, but she is at her best when she is herself. When you get to the bootom of her, her heart is pure gold."

I nod in indication that he may be correct in his knowledge of her.

"I'll give her a second turn," I promise him.

He smiles, but it is a troubled smile, like dark clouds before a tempest.

"But steer clear of the two rates," he comes on again, insistently. "They've hooked you. But I'll keep out a watchful eye. If one of them so much as looks at you wrong, to the police he goes."

Detached, I look at him steadily, studying him, attempting a non-partisanship to his stern methods of protection.

"Why so overly protective?" I question.

"I like you, Star?" he whispers, his voice primed with emotion. "And I want you to like it here, to stay here in this apartment, to consider me your lifelong friend and this your home. I will fight for that, if that is

what you want. After all," and his
trembles, "it was I who got you into
mess, so let me be the one to get you
"Okay," I mutter half-heartedly. "If
want to take on the responsibility, bu
seems to me you are making a mour
out of a mole hill. They are not w
worrying about."
"Maybe not worth worrying about,
most certainly worth being cautious abo
he goes on. "I have run into their kind
fore and I know to what limits they will
to get what they want—or what they th
they deserve. They're that stupid."
His blue eyes are steadily on me and th
depth is puzzling.
"Hit them hard enough in the guts a
they'll knuckle down," I say insensib
"They'll turn into little boys again. Besid
after all your efforts, after all your sac
fice of protection what if I turn out like t
punks you mention a while ago—not wor
protecting?"
He raises an eyebrow and stares at m
quizzically.
"Because your not a punk, and never w
be. Your fine as diamond dust." He wink
"No, Star, your one in a million. You'r
head and shoulders above anything tha
comes into my place. Your an asset in fac
I will even go so far as to say that a grea
number of them come into my bar just be

cause you are there. They like mingling with a real man for a change, someone different from the ones who usually hang out here. They respect you, and they don't respect each other, or the shity punks they have to deal with."

I am superficially interested, and I seek legitimate information.

"Hoping to find in me that everlasting friend," I say, suggestively, clicking my tongue against my teeth. "That friend who, actually, never exists."

"He exists," he utters scornfully, his forehead creased into a series of thin lines. He looks away, his eyes startingly cold, but inponderable, concealed, hidden. They are like glass, and they take in the flood of light like water. His lips oddly tremble. "I will always believe that two people, two men, or two women for that matter can be life long friends—that real men can love each other, with a love that goes beyond the love of woman."

I am quick to reply.

"But if so, they will be effeminate men, or, one feminine male and one masculine male—but never two masculine males."

He is still looking away, gazing at something or someone I am unable to see, as if that something has suddenly become fantastically invisible. Interest and curiosity stir in his eyes.

"No, I mean two masculine men," whispers, his voice low, plaintive. "Lik perhaps (he underscores this) or athl or real he-men—men who are so obvio masculine there is no sign, no trace of ininity anywhere in their make-up. I k this is possible."

"But such men as you describe w naturally seek out women," I come b tartly. "And there would be no impulse, inclination, no desire within them to d on such closeness with another man."

He looks at me sadly, as if he has los battle, and his eyes look hollow, a mimi to fatality. He drops his head and stares the glistening stones. He is so silent, I th he is praying.

"I knew two boys when I was at L.S.U he says at last, his voice husky, brisk, t timed. "They were on the football team a they were like that. They were inseperab The last I heard from them they still a Go everywhere together. Do everything gether. I understand they even share t same bank account, both own their car, a both paying on the same house togethe They even visit one another's parents t gether. They never do anything alone."

My mind grasps such a reflection—a unio shorn of all tangibility, void of love, yet s strong in affection that everything slip away and nothing is left but the other. Th

Romans had known that kind of manly affection—the love of warrior for warrior.

"If what you say about them is true," I say, "then it is a rare thing indeed. Such a friendship could only happen once during a lifetime. And their's of course is an exception."

"No, I know of another," he comes on warmly, his eyes taking on a new and brilliant light, like lamps suddenly turned up in the darkness. "There are two firemen here in Baton Rouge. You couldn't cut them apart with a pairing knife. They both lift weights, are as well built as Steve Reeves. They even look alike. Their love for one another is that strong. It has caused them to blend, to resemble one another, like some men resemble their wives and visa-versa." He sighs heavily and looks away again, this time, his eyes enormous in their capacity of depth. "So—it can happen. It does happen. Strange as it may seem, it does happen. And I have heard that when two masculine men get together there is no parting them—ever."

"Only death!" I cry vainly, and my own voice goes over me sadly. I think of my kid brother who was dead, killed on a battleship while in the Navy during the campaign of Truk. We had been bound to one another to the extent of exchanging blood. Yes, I think two men can love each other. The love of the mind, which is stronger than the

crave of touch, of the flesh.

"Do these men come here—to this I ask immediately, almost impatiently, I look at him in a way I know is baffl

"Never," he answers tersely. "Why do ask."

"I merely wondered if they were a pa all this, or if they consider themselv part."

"I don't think they do, Star. They apart from all this in a way that is fur apart than the oceans and the contin yet close too—dangerously close. Onl thin hair-line divides them from this wo the world of the gay." He pauses, stret his legs, gazes toward Dalas, who is bowing to her invincible gods, then sta with probing eyes to me. They are impris ed in light, and their long dusky lashes poised in mid-flight, like the dark wings a startled bird. "You don't like the Lan do you, not truly, I mean?"

It is I now, who looks away. Yet, I s nothing in the distance. Even the ships the river are vague, gray impressions abo the water, dark blobs and not ships at a They are more like prisoners pulling their chains.

"I find it unusual," I manage to form a impression. "Unusual to say the least—un like anything I have ever seen before. And for that reason, I like it I guess."

Truly's face lights up like a child's lantern.

"Then—I have saved you from it all," he cries happily, slapping me on the leg, his hand as warm, as thoughtful as a surgeons. "The Lamp has done you good. You have come alive—you have found your home!"

"It's almost noon," I half-hear him whisper to me. "So come, Star, have lunch with Dalas and me. We have enough food for ten people and we will not eat without you, for –for I—we love you, and want you to share our happiness."

"WE LOVE YOU, AND WANT YOU TO SHARE OUR HAPPINESS." The sound of those words stab at me like a sharp knife. Oh! how it hurts! How cruel some folks can be and not mean anything by it! How they can make you feel outside of things, outside of themselves. It is they who close the doors with a bang! I want to run away and, like an ostrich, stick my head in the sand—escape! escape!

Yet—drawn somehow by him, his voice, his urgent words, drawn strangely as the Black Lamp Lounge has mysteriously drawn me these many fleeting days and nights, I rise slowly as if hypnotized. His voice betrays everything from which I have fled. Friendship, love, being wanted and wanting in return. The sound of it reaches out and

pulls me to him. Though I fight to break away something stronger than I, something ethereally wonderous, though I cannot yet tell, impells me like a butterfly upon a thorn. I wiggle but cannot set myself free. I yield. It is the temperature of the strong not the weak. I yield in order to seek an avenue of escape later. Like the words of Shakespeare: Man kills the thing he loves. The brave man with a sword, the coward with a kiss. I drastically needed what I was so foolishly casting away, denying what was really mine.

"Come!" he urges, holding out his hand wondering no doubt about my reluctnace. He does not yet know the sacrifice I am giving of myself for his sake.

We cross the hot courtyard together, and Dalas rises and comes to the table to lay out the lunch.

"Well, have you two warriors settled all the problems of the world?" she asks, taking from the hamper a bottle of wine, a loaf of french bread, sausage, cheese, and melon and dumps them on the table carelessly. "It's taken you long enough. You've been over there with your heads together for the past two hours."

"Jealous?" Truly kids.

"Of which one of you?" she asks, laughing. She pulls off a hunk of french bread and crams it into his mouth playfully. I see that they get on well together. He catches hold of her long hair, yanks her across the

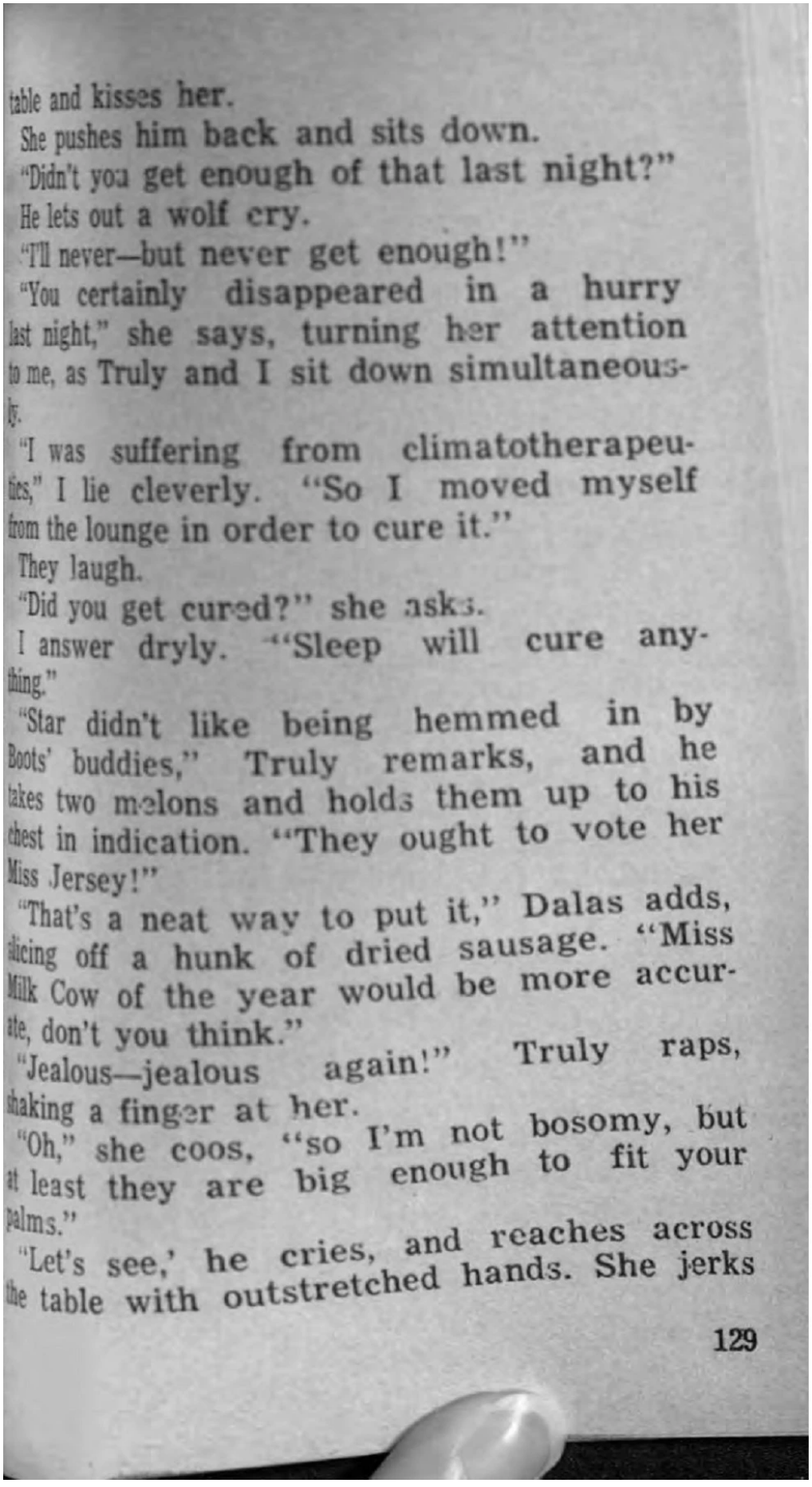


table and kisses her.

She pushes him back and sits down.

"Didn't you get enough of that last night?"

He lets out a wolf cry.

"I'll never—but never get enough!"

"You certainly disappeared in a hurry last night," she says, turning her attention to me, as Truly and I sit down simultaneously.

"I was suffering from climatotherapeutics," I lie cleverly. "So I moved myself from the lounge in order to cure it."

They laugh.

"Did you get cured?" she asks.

I answer dryly. "Sleep will cure anything."

"Star didn't like being hemmed in by Boots' buddies," Truly remarks, and he takes two melons and holds them up to his chest in indication. "They ought to vote her Miss Jersey!"

"That's a neat way to put it," Dalas adds, slicing off a hunk of dried sausage. "Miss Milk Cow of the year would be more accurate, don't you think."

"Jealous—jealous again!" Truly raps, shaking a finger at her.

"Oh," she coos, "so I'm not bosomy, but at least they are big enough to fit your palms."

"Let's see,' he cries, and reaches across the table with outstretched hands. She jerks

back, slices at him with the knife.

"They're sore now from last nigh squeals, cutting her brightly-lit eyes me. She seems determined that I l her and Truly's affairs, as if I shou what they do when they are alone t In her confessions of their intimacy, letting me know that she is not abo play. Indirectly, she is throwing her me, while at the same time she is on faithfully with Truly. God! how women are!

"Seriously though," she says sm cleverly, for she does not know that has already informed me of her reas wanting me to meet Boots. "I am gl two finally got together. But I am sor was with her uncouth companions."

"It doesn't matter," I answer tersely ing the thought aside. "But she just isn brand of beef. So—nothing was gaine lost."

Dalas raises an eyebrow. She gazes from the top of her eyes.

"And just what is your brand of be I play my triumph card.

"Oh—a Natalie Wood with a little of roe's weight, spiced with a jigger of rey Hepburn, peppered with Abbe I wit, sweetened with a little sprinklin Leslie Caron, gloomed over with the ange of Garbo, and tossed between tw

sheets with a Sophie Loren—none of which you are, my dear!"

"Ouch' That smarts!" she comes back directly, laughing foolishly, but her eyes snap.

"Well hardy har-har," Truly gimics. "You sure don't want much. Where you gonna find a dame like that?"

"That's the biggest project of my career," I answer with a serious note to my voice.

"Just searching! searching!" she sings excitedly, mockingly, swaying her body from left to right. "Just searching! searching!"

She drops her voice but her torso keeps up its steady inviting motion as she nibbles on a chicken drumstick she takes from the hamper.

For a moment, we sit in silence eating, the record playing drifting into the "Legend of the Jivaro," the piercing feminine voice wailing of Incan woes and tragedies. I watch Truly and Dalas eat. They have dispensed with table manners, which is a wonderful thing I think, even with civilized forks and spoons and knives, and they tear at their food with deft fingers, completely uninhibited, being themselves which I have found so common among the inhabitants of this lounge, this strange, abstract world.

"Star, I am mad to see your apartment,

and your paintings," Truly says, bre
our reign of silence. "But I want to s
at night, when the lights will add to it.
going to take Dalas to Thunderbird B
thi safternoon, but when I get back, if
okay with you, I would like to come up
see it." He turns a grinning, impish fac
Dalas. "And you're not invited."

She shrugs, but I can tell she doesn't
it. For she tosses a bone into the han
with a jerky motion that seems futile,
a wretchedness that betrays her feeling

"Sure, Truly," I say pleasantly. "
time. My apartment is open house."

"Does that include the female gen
too?" Dalas asks rather sheepishly.
rises and begins to clean off the table, p
ing the extra food back into the hamper

"Anyone who can tolerate me," I rep
and I smile at her with a smile I do
feel. Somehow I want this beautiful girl a
do not want her at the same time. It is li
craving some forbidden thing.

Truly and I rise from the table. The wi
has made his face flush even more than t
sun, and he looks viciously radiant.
takes the record off the player, slips it int
a holder and closes the case. With the han
per in one hand and the record player i
another, and Dalas close at his side, h
heads for the tiled passage way and t
Lafayette street.

"See you later, Star," he cries over hi
shoulder, as they leave me standing alon
in the courtyard. I watch them silently, in

tently, as they cross the lake of flagstones. For the first time I notice that Dalas is wearing the same white jump-suit she had worn last night, the same white boots. She had not been home to change. I know now that they had slept together last night.

It is late Sunday evening now, and it is raining. I am standing near my window looking down onto the drenched courtyard. There is a sound of footsteps on the lower stairway, and I jump, terrified, before my mind gathers its logic and I realize it must be Truly.

He sweeps into the apartment, completely drenched, and looks like Neptune belched up from the sea. His yellow nylon blazer sticks to his skin like thin rubber and is so transparent in its wettness his nipples show darkly through.

"It's a deluge!" he cries discordantly, his arms and legs spread wide, every inch of him glistening silvery like a fish. "If this keeps up, Louisiana will sink in the Gulf."

Quickly, I toss him a dry towel and he slips out of his blazer and trunks and rubs his naked body. His dark skin glows under the rubbing. My eyes rake over his physique. God! If Truly couldn't make Dalas feel like a woman then I think, what in the hell

does she want. A stud horse?

"Enjoy your swim?" I ask, my eye exploring his body, picking out minu tails about him that I know I will tr paint later. Naked, in the glow of this dark room, he appears almost savage physical being, the masculine import nudity, dominates this small apartment apartment seems smaller with his pre every object in it acutely aware of his ical existence.

"Yeah," he answers, as he wraps towel about his loins and twists one beneath the wrapping to secure it. "B usual Dalas and I got into an argumen I said to hell with it and took her home can think of the pettiest excuses for a She's the most temperamental female ever met—which she blames on her ar talent. And the lid blew off when I told that you had talent and you never got at anything."

"My long hard years of training," I b i toff lightly. The tenure of life had ciplined my temperament, though, the s the bruises, the heartbreak, and not the prenticeship at the arts. But I do not him this.

"Now to look at your apartment and p ings," he comes on excitedly, turning way and that to glance but momenta from one object to the next, from one pa

ing to the next. "It's nice—it's really nime!" he praises. "It's you, Star. It's you all over." He pauses now before the painting of the man from another planet. A sudden stillness comes over the room. He is awed.

"Did you know Rowdy before you came here to Baton Rouge?" he questions, his voice low, the sound of it skeptical but sinuous.

I shake my head. "I knew no one from here before I came. Why?"

"This person looks exactly like Rowdy," he explains, pointing to the figure in the painting. "Even his build is like Rowdy's. It's downright uncanny. You would think he had posed for this."

"It does resemble him," I agree. "I suppose that is why I am impressed with Rowdy. Something in my subconscious nature, I suppose."

"It's more than that," he adds seriously. "This is your ideal figure, and Rowdy fits this idealism. He is the flesh and blood prototype of what you seek out to paint, a living model of everything you consider perfect in the male." He breathes heavily, and turns away from the painting, as if to shut it out from the world, and looks at me. "Truly I envy him." His eyes are filled with torment, and there is a hungriness about them, as though they themselves are being gnawed

on from deep within.

"You need not be envious," I say, tryin to make him feel beter. "You have a fin build, and as good looking as he. Too, yo have splendid health, remarkable I must sa considering your occupation."

"Oh, I get enough exercise," he says, an he flexes his biceps. "A throwback to m college days as an athlete. I swim a lot, hik sometimes, and I lift weights. I refuse t let myself go, just because I no longer go t school. I suppose in a way, I worship youth I get that I guess from my environment with my patrons. They place such a prem ium on youth and good looks."

"The fear that haunts us all," I say, an it is more of a cry. "The constant dread of growing old, of becoming unattractive in the eyes of others." I glance at the window which is shrouded in water, as if in a futile attempt to se my past. "I think all single people are more conscious of their looks an dhealth and their youth than those who are married. Married people slip into a groove, and they concern themselves with thing sapart from themselves, especially after they have children. Their own bodies, their own looks becomes of secondary im- portance."

"I don't suppose I will ever marry," he says, reflective. "I love my freedom too much. And too, I like to be alone. In fact, that is my one retreat, so that I can really be myself, study myself. A narcissus com- plex, I guess."

"We all have our mirrors," I say. "I too, have to break away from society, from everything actually, and everyone, for a moment of solitude. Life becomes terrifyingly suffocating, and, like a swimmer plunging to the surface for a gasp of air so must I run away from life, to get a new breath of myself, to rearm myself for the time when I will have to return to that depthless dark ocean of society. And I find myself in these paintings, my writing, and what memories I have worth remembering."

Truly stands before my "Fiesta Bravo" now, and its reflections of orange and scarlet splash on his naked face and chest and turn him to the tawny hue of amber.

"You are a great artist, Star," he mutters, his voice low. "Far better than I expected. But now that I have seen your work I realize just how good you are. You make all these other so called Baton Rouge artists look like children dabbling in finger paint. You are the true artist, and I see you in your work, the color, the fine details, the search for perfection. And now I understand you better. I know now that you are a greater person than most people suspect. But naturally, since I like you so much, I see wonderful things about you I flatter myself that others are too hurried, to careless to notice."

"Thanks," I reply, and it comes straigh from my heart. I need praise, more perhap than I nee dlove and affection. For I nee once more, the old confidence I used to have and lost when love was lost. I sigh painfully. Love can take so much.

The wild rain lashes at the windows, shakes the house, and moans like an animal, as if, in some whimsical desperation it is trying to force its way in. There is a dark cast to the sky overhead, promising even more rain, and the gray panes, slushed with fallen water, makes the apartment resemble an adobe beneath the tides.

Truly stares at the window and an urgency comes to his voice:

"Star, if you don't mind, can I stay the night? I hate to drive all the way out on Blank Road in this weather. When it rains, this much water backs up to the hub of your car along Third and Boyd Avenue."

"Why sure," I answer, glad for his company on this lonely, rain washed Sunday, the loneliness, the melancholy mood bad weather always brings. "But I kick in my sleep."

He smiles a bright hot smile, and he practically wiggles all over. I can see he is overjoyed by my approval of his staying.

"I kick back," he warns playfully," and on top of that I snore."

While he busies himself exploring the

apartment, going over some of my writings, looking at Marine war album, I go into the kitchen and prepare us both a steak, with complete trimmings. I enjoy this, for to me it was like old times again when I owned my own home and kept up a lively reign of entertainment. On those times, hardly a week end went by without my having two or more couples in for meals.

Truly brings a photograph into the kitchen that he has found on the bedroom night table.

"From that other world?" he asks shyly, holding it out at arms length. "She's sure a beauty."

"Yeah," I answer, as I take baked potatoes from the oven." She's the root of all my troubles."

I stare at the face but for an instant, then drag away my eyes. I get a glimpse of my whole life imprisoned in that gilt frame.

I fix our meal on a little table next to the window in the living room, take out my best silver, my most colorful cloth and napkins, deep wine-scarlet, and even light candles.

When the meal is over I show Truly how to dip his cigarette in the melted wax beneath the candle flames and roll them to make their ends tipped.

"It's an old Marine Corps custom," I explain, as I light it for him. I watch as he

places the waxed tip between his lips an inhale. This pleases him immensely, and h continues to inhale, let out puffs, and all th while turning the cigarette in his hands. M mind races back to the island of Guadal canal. I see faces, some dead now, that have not recalled to memory in years.

"You do everything top-drawer or not a all," he says in a deeply flattering voice "That's what makes you so special. You're first class, and you go first class in every thing, your clothes, your taste in art objects, your manners, your personality. It seems you have taken a finishing course in everything. You're a male Emily Post. In fact you remind me of everything I have ever read about Valentino."

"My mother's favorite actor," I say, nonchalantly. "And if you promise to keep a secret, I'll tell you something else."

"I swear and hope to die." He holds up one hand.

"She named me Valentino—my middle name, that is."

"You see, I know all about you—with you I'm physic."

We finish the evening over a bottle of chilled cherry wine, talking, smoking, listening to records and the rain hurling itself out of the night. Truly has enjoyed every second of it, and we are strangely close now, the elements outside hemming us in this vague little corner of the world, and all else becomes less than nothing, non-existent. We are strangely exiled, and in this exile we

communicate, and at times without speaking a word. Our electrical currents touch, their invisible circles whirling around us merging, scaping against one another, exploding, and veering as one. And when the lights are at last dimmed and we are lying in bed, with an occasional flash of lightning which throws white into the room with the brightness of day, I feel this oneness, this completeness again.

"Would you like to know Rowdy?" he asks out of the darkness, his voice like the voice of an invisible medium for his form is eaten up in the blackness.

"Yes I would" I answer him, speaking as if to emptiness. "I think I would like to paint him, to have him as a permanent model for my space character."

I hear him sigh, and the warmth of his body tells me he is still there, though something has broken our currents. I dose. I slep, and then I awaken. There is a weight on my chest. Truly is curled up beside me. His head is on my stomach, and in my droziness I lay and listen to his breathing. It is quick, rapidly paced, and his body is as hot as a caldron. His right arm is over my legs and he runs his hands up my thighs —no doubt dreaming of Dalas! One hand touches my crotch, and through my pubic hair, almost caressingly. He slides his face downward. I turn over on my side, defiling

his body.

I awaken in the midst of the birth dawn, a rose colored dawn that has, in stolen light, a faint hint of forebod which I can see through the calm panes is a dawn pregnant with the future, and fulfilled body awaits it with open arms.

Suddenly, I think of Truly. I turn quic and stare at the rumpled pillow beside He is gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

It is a standing custom in Baton Rou that on the Fourth of July all the bars a lounges serve free food to its patrons. T Black Lamp is no exception. The place stuffed like a Christmas turkey. Japan lanterns have been strung across the cou yard, along with lawn candles to ward insects and, though the night is stiffli there is just enough motion in the air make them flare.

I make my way down the apartment stai wedge my way through numerous coupl lounging along the steps, and to the cou yard. It is spilling over with people, ma I have seen numerous ti,mes some once

twice, and a great number never. Even the balconies around the courtyard are wedged from the iron lace work to the inner walls with laughing shouting people and they look down on the spectacle like thrilled awed spectators in a Roman arena. Confetti and paper garlands are being flung down onto the shadowy faces and the courtyard is startlingly alive! It moves, it breathes like a great dark heart, trying to push its way through the walls. Screams, cries, falsetto voices mingled recklessly with masculine bass voices, and out of that den come shrieks, some girlish, others aping at girlishness. It roars, it hums, it perches on mayhem. It borders on madness!

And here I am amidst it again, a part of these unorthodox worshippers, prostrating myself before whatever Gods that best suit my purpose. I should not have come. I should stay away from this bar, move, find me another apartment on the other side of town. For since that rainy Sunday night when Truly stayed the night at my place there is something askew, something invariably wrong. He speaks to me much as before, but I can sense that he prefers to avoid me.

I have tried in vain to fathom the reason. I know he is not pealous of me nad Dalas, though we have engaged in numerous long conversations in the lounge while he worked

the bar, and I know I have done nothin
make him angry. I know too, that he is
like some of these other men who frequ
this lounge, though my mind keeps tumb
over and over again and again the cr
incident that night in my apartment.
was asleep, I caution my brain. Yet the
honorable question comes back hour a
hour to haunt me. It is such an incrimi
ing scourge on his character, I cannot e
speak the word aloud, not even beneath
breath. It's that humiliating. He is too m
culine—far—far—too masculine!

Since that night, since I detected a diff
ence in his manner toward me, his idiosy
rasies, I have thrown myself into my wo
and, miraculously, have completed the
tire west wall of the state capitol. Not
labor of love, even from the first, it was
grueling, unsatisfying task, for I did n
have his praise, his constant encoura
ment to back me up. My mural is a shad
on the wall, and no more than that, f
there is no love in it, no passion, no feelin
Like the Egyptians, who's artists we
slaves, and who were dictated what to pai
by the Pharoahs, applying their brush u
der the lash of the whip, so had I paint
my mural under the tormenting dictum
Truly's avoiding silence. That I suffere
Yes. I have no real, genuine friends he
in this southern city, with the exception

Truly, and now I feel I have lost him forever.

Over the dark, mask-like faces of the mob I search for him, though I try not to be obvious about it. I abhor unsettled affairs. I want to draw him out in conversation, to bring into the light of the surface what is wrong. But he keeps me at arms length. At times, I have seen him looking at me, looking questioningly, knotting his eyebrows as if to ask me something, the answer to which, though vastly important to him, he will nevertheless find perplexing, even painful. Too, at times, I have seen him flash a ferocious look at me, and I could almost feel his eyes burning on my face, and there were times that he looked at me curiously, as if suddenly, I had become a complete stranger with whom he has found himself accidently speaking intimately.

With the other patrons at the bar, I have made a point to notice, he is the same. With the punks, he is like a punk. With the old scores, men in their sixties, he is the young trade, with the alcholics, he is a sympathetic listener, with the nelly faggots he is the dashing man about town, and with the drag queens, he can at times become a dotting parent, giving them advice about their drag clothes, what colors they should wear, the hair styles which become them most, what cosmetics and what kind of jewelry.

With women, he is the All-American
chaser, whether they are lesbians or
But with me now, he is changed. And
mit, it hurts.

That I was no longer the idiom of
thoughts, the most important personag
him in this bar, left me completely w
This was all I had momentarily, with w
to feed my thoughts, my time. To be s
thing in his eyes. To be, still, what I
was before—no, I must not think of
now. A wild squeal invades my thought
an effeminate voice is directed at me.
—Star—you darling thing you!" I find
face in the spectre of darkness. It is Fa
all bizarre ni a multi-colored blouse, and
fa is directly behind her, their arms aro
two tassled haired, butchy boys. My thoug
fight their way back, and once mor
search for Truly. I see him now, bend
over the table of two fairies, their featu
of which I cannot describe as any ot
way than morosely plain. The type you
behind staid desks, in bookkeeping est
lishments, at times as male secretaries.
glamorous old maids. They preen th
clothes, twist here and there with th
hands as if their wrists are broken, a
their gray eyes are carnivorously hung
Truly appears admissively bored. He s
two plates of steaming shrimp before the
departs quickly. His face is etched wi

pain.

I worm my way through the maze of people standing, sitting, like so many bunches of juicy grapes, recoiling from sharp elbows, fat butts, crotches leaning too far forward, against thighs both masculine and feminine, through this intoxication of perfume, sickishly sweet, after shave lotion that is obviously imported, talcum powder which lines its traces with the orient, fresh yet, is less of a scent and more of a stealthy nostalgia which raids the mind. It is a scent that is willingly up to the god in the golden flower of candlelight in exchange for sex-love. It is the call of the isren of both sexes, the intimate suggestion, the whisper that is louder than any scream.

I come out beyond the dripping fountain. Truly sees me now, but when I turn, he quickly jerks his head away, busying himself at waiting on four men and two women near the cage of the frightened, ill-starred cockatoos. For an instant of uncontrolled notion, I start to go over to him, to speak, but I am repulsed by the sight of Rowdy, alone, leaning against the nearest column which supports two of the porticos. He is looking at me shyly, and he is beyond me and Truly. Shamelessly, I take advantage of this cue, encouraged now by Truly's obstinate coldness, his obvious allofness. I pass him with a slight, friendly now, for I can never be impolite directly, and hurriedly to

Rowdy, eager-like, as if he is waiting f
me. That this is a test which I aim at Tru
personally, I am not sure at the time. An
thing to arouse him out of his doldrums,
force him to come forward and show h
hand. A year ago, I would have shrugge
this bit of rebuff off as casually, as unim
portantly, as I would have thumped a ciga
ette butt into the gutter. But now, now i
my isolation from the world, I considere
his constraint vitally essential to my mom
entry existence, and if not my existence
then—vaguely—my immediate happiness.

"My name is Star," I say brazenly, to thi
nice looking young kid who, despite th
aired excitement around him, appears sain
ly calm. At the sound of my voice, he brace
up like a private before a Three-Star Gen
eral. "And you're Rowdy," I continue, a littl
less ostentatiously.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Star," he says
fairly gleaming, and he thrusts out a bronz
hand which I take.

"I say you alone over here," I come o
strong, surprised at my own transparency
"Would like to join you, if you don't mind
It seems everyone is paired off indirectly-
if not directly."

His eyes grow large as a child's, and the
eagerness in his expression is unmatched
It's as if he longs to say everything in the
world at once but, undecided on what to be

gin with, says nothing.

"I've been wanting to speak with you for a long time," he says finally, after a moment's hesitation. "Eh—Mr.—can I call you Star?" (I nod) "But everytime I would see you, you would be occupied with someone else. Gee—but you're popular."

I shrug my shoulders, laughing.

"Appearance is deceiving, Rowdy," I clue him in. "Actually, I am about the most unpopular person in this bar. I guess it is because I do not condone to most of their attitudes about life."

"I se what you mean," he comes back quickly, defending, with these casually spoken words, both our thoughts. "That's what I like about you. You're different. You're mysterious, and you're all man. I can tell. Sometimes I wonder why you come here. You do not fit."

"Nor do you," I add. I galnce quickly about me. "If we can find an empty table somewhere then we will sit and talk."

He makes a quick, thorough search with his deep brown eyes.

"There's two empty stools at the bar," he cries, pointing.

"Why—my old stomping ground," I whisper, bemused, recalling swiftly its early memories. We take them quickly, before someone else spies them. "This is where I stood the first time I ever came into this

bar," I explain to him, remembering Tru
insistance that it was reserved for me. "
been like an observation post. Here I h
ear-marked every person who has ever co
ni here. Clock them in my mind. No t
are alike—whic hmakes this place all
more unusual to me."

"Are you a writer?" he asks eager
pivoting child-like in the white plastic sto
leaning back comfortably, as if impatient
ready to indulge in an evening of unquenc
able joy. "Of course I know that you a
an artist already. Truly told me, and if y
write also, then that's too much!"

I smile. He is right. Both would be in
moderate.

I light a cigarette, offer him one invitin
ly. He refuses.

"I dable in writing a little," I explai
"But, unlike painting, writing must com
from life. And, after all, the first goal i
life is living—which I haven't done enoug
of yet to write."

"You seem well informed," he flatters me
and I see the truth of it in his eyes, eye
now that are limpid pools of bright gold.

"But to be a good writer," I continue, self
indulgently, "one must know what he i
writing about. Every character should be a
familiar to him as his own. Perhaps more
so, for no one really knows himself. We have
a limited knowledge of ourselves, but we

probe throughout the remainder of our lives trying to understand ourselves."

He looks with apprehension, as if I have read his mind.

"I guess I will never understand myself either," he sighs, and his face is intensified with pain. "Nor why I come into this bar. There is no one ni here I care to speak to, and I don't either, unless it is you and Truly. They all seem so—so unbalanced, one way or another—like in a hospital or something. When you visit a hospital you look at all the white beds lined in rows and you know that there is something wrong with everyone in them. It's like that here. You know they are suffering from something that perhaps even they themselves can explain." He pivots and looks about him with discernment, then quickly back to me. "They fascinate me in a way — yet it all frightens me too, like a horror movie that terrorizes you, yet you wouldn't miss it for anything." A cloud passes before his absorbing eyes. "What frightens me most is that I know that if I come here then I must be sick too—am I, Star? Am I sick like them?" He nods toward the labyrinth of giggling bodies, of passionate, wild eyed faces.

"Not necessarily," I answer, bending nearer to him, so that he can understand

me above the scintillating roar. "You tainly do not look sick to me, physicall mentally. You're as normal as applie

He alughs softly, but I can tell he i satisfied with my answer. He squirms i seat, moving even closer to me, his el resting stiffly on the bar. With his face ped in both hands, he is very much lik elf sitting on a toad-stool. Even his brown eyes, imprisoned in their rin startlingly long lashes, seem pixie like, the alba of them are encircled with a trinsic seriousness which appears misc like to me.

"But why do I come here, Star? I've to know!" he cries suddenly, lisping words, words which, like soured food, r erupt to the surface. "I come here e night. I sit alone. I talk to no one. I a stranger to them all. I do not even da with any of the girls, or do I care to friend any of the boys here my own Yet—night after night, I still come. Ev night when this place closes, I tell my that I will never come back, but I alw do. You know that. You see me here—h seen me often."

I nod that I have. I think quietly fo moment. The music is growing inten louder, more barbaric, the drums sound as if they are being played ina jet pl hanger—hollow somehow—but so madd

ingly three dimensional. He is looking at me, searching for my thoughts, waiting expectantly for my decision, his eyes burning into mine until I almost feel them, waiting perplexed, as if I am the wisdom of the ages and he will rise or fall by my sole ultimatum.

"You like girls of course," I utter finally. I do not want to ask this question right out, to fling at him mockingly what will be a natural insult to his radiant young manhood. That he is all man within and without I never doubt. I have lived around men enough to recognize one when I see him. He is that and more, but desire is of the mind, of the spirit of things, and not of the body.

"Why yes, I like girls," he answers readily, not flinching. He does not make a lot over the question, pretending with that why, "hell yes I like broads—who doesn't—like to go to bed with them," Or, "Girls! I dig them, man! They're the most—the absolute most." And I instantly like this about him. He is not the braggy type, and he will not retort to pretending just in order to gloss a peculiar situation—like most young kids his age or even older, kids who will put on any kind of an act just to convince someone that they are hep with the opposite sex, even ridiculous things like, "and I was hiking to L.A., one time, and here comes this

sexy dame in a white convertible who pick me up and takes me to her swanky pad, an boy did we have a blast!" or wrose still "And this dame, this sex pot with the bi balloons who was old enough to be my ol woman comes on with me, and when it i over she asks for seconds!" No, this boy i not this kind, and he continues with: "I like them if they're not silly, or giddy, and i they don't try to be sexy like — like my mother."

He frowns at this last, and I can tell he is swallowing something, keeping something to himself.

Instantly, I grasp now about him, this buried something is effecting him to the degree that he is compelled to discuss it with someone, to call attention to it by calling attention io himself. In part now, but vaguely, I understand why he seeks something else in this bar.

"Sounds like your mother is an invitingly attractive woman." I pursue him further, turning it off as casually as I know how. I do not look at him when I say this, but keep my eyes on the smoke of my cigarette.

"Some people think so," he sighs, and it is more of a whimper, against his desolation, as if he regrets that his mother is beautiful. He stares at the bar for a moment, his head in his hands, then as quickly, he jerks his head back and he looks sudden-

ly tired, drained, so unusual a physical interposition I think, among the young. I gather now that hi smother is questionably moral. I swiftly recall a boy once who lived in my neighborhood who loathed al lwomen because his mother was a prostitute. He never quite got over it, rebelling against all relations with them, especially anything sexual, and regarded sex of any nature as a phychotic crime. In remembering this, I turn and stare at this good looking boy beside me, this athletic young man, who smells of soap and water, who has the look of the out-of-doors about him, browned, radiant, indescribably capable of anything and everything that other males do. And I refuse to accept that, in that double-edged brain of his, an ingrained regard for normal things, for normal joys, ingratify his masculine desires.

"Is your father still living?" I ask lowly, keeping my voice dubious to my curiosity —the sudden compusion to learn all about him. He seemed so at ease with me, as if we had known each other for a long time, and appeared to be enjoying our relation, the indirectness of my probing, like a surgeon's knife, into his hidden, but unerasable detachment.

"He exists," he says, stretching out the word, as if he regrets having to say it. "But if he really lives, Star, I cannot say. Not

the way I would live if I was married—no the way I would live with her, my mother. His face is suddenly gripped with rebellion and his hands coil into hard knots as he opens and closes them. "Daddy loves her so much and she never allows him to per nor to love her, to kiss her as other men do, and I know—I have known long ago—that she will not allow him to do anything else with her."

I am at a loss for words after this incisive information, and I know my face betrays my inability for communication, but I am saved momentarily by one of the waiters Truly has employed on this Fourth of July week-end, knowing the lounge is going to be packed, who finally comes toward our stools to wait on us. He is bringing with him two large plates of steaming shrimp, tiny bowls of oyster gumbo, and hot sauce which he sits in front of us with a smile. Sweat is dripping off his face and naked arms in streams, but his eyes are pleasant despite his fatigue, compromising.

"Compliments of Truly," he announces dryly, a little skeptical, for I know he has said this a thousand times this night. "Happy Fourth of July." He claps his hands together. "Now what'll you gentlemen have to drink?"

"Nothing but beer for me," Rowdy cries, waving a hand in indignation, and I add ab-

stractly: "The same for both of us."

He hurries back with two bottle, dripping ice, and two frosted glasses, which Rowdy and I eagerly commence to consume.

"This is some treat!" Rowdy cries happily, as he peels the pink shelled shrimp and thrusts the juicy white morsels into his mouth. He takes a swig of the beer to wash it down. I am welled up with incomparable pity for him, this fine young person, this youth who has before him the very enormity of the future, yet who must fabricate for his own immediate self-importance, a future he fears to face.

"Wouldn't it be too much i fwe had this every night," he comes on eagerly, taking another swallow of beer. "And we could sit here and talk—you listen—while I bore you with my home life."

"You don't bore me," I am quick to reply. "I want to know about you, and I want to help you if I can, even if in but a small way, so long as I help."

He drops one of the shrimp back into the mound of rice and stares at me skeptically. "If you mean that, then you are the first person I have ever met—especially in this bar—who is willing to help me without expecting something in return."

"I hope you do not think that I—,"

"Ah, Star, heaven forbid," he apologizes. "Never! That is why I am so shook up

about you wanting to help. I know you a not their kind." He shakes his head in th direction of the cockatoos cage where group of young boys, clad in shorts an striped shirts, are harrassing the birds t fits of delirium. "You are sure of life. Yo know what you want," he rambles on. "Yo know what makes people tick, and I wi never understand people, not really, not i here anyway. I am happy that I have foun someone at last whom I can talk to, wh can give me advice." He turns now from th torpid shrimp and eyes me steadily. Hi pupils glitter like confetti. His dark brow hair is trapped in the flaring gold of carriage lamp, and there is such an outwar display of strength about his thick neck, hi naked arms on the bar, the bein that thrust from hi sdarkened forehead that I think o David with the sling and stone facing Go liath. "But I knew somehow that you wer like you are," he whispers affectionately his low voice bubbling with meaning, emo tion. "I knew from the first that you are stranger here, like me, a spectator really Can we be friends? Special friends I mean?"

"I'd die if we didn't" I answer coquet tishly.

Rowdy is caught up in the intoxication his body moving slightly from side to side in time to the drums, as he sits and eats the shiny shrimp like pink baby tongues

the sparkling beer making silver rings around his dark lips. That he feels at home with me is obvious. He is self-absorbed. I have become his ally in his inward rage, his utter rebellious battle with his parents.

"I would like sometime to meet your girl," I say suggestively, hoping with the question to bring to light still further, something tangible on which I can steer him correctly. "Or do you consider this bar an appropriate place?"

He is suddenly serious again. I have broken his spell.

"I haven't got a girl, not really," he lisps, smacking his greasy lips on the shrimp. "Not a steady. I rarely date. All girls and boys my age like to do is go to drive-ins and neck in the back seat of the car while the show is going."

"You disapprove of necking?"

"I disapprove of any physical alliance with a girl," he answers tartly, bluntly. "For some reason, everytime I am about to —to come on with some girl, I think of my Mother, the way she treats Daddy, and I hate touching anyone." He glances away, stares at himself through the amber mirror behind the bar, as though judging his own reflection, as if gauging himself through his image and not through himself really. "I loathe Mother—in fact," and his voice flings out the shameless words. "In fact, I hate

and despise her—for what she has done,
doing to Daddy. I have seen the look in
eyes when he tries to come on with h
that hurt, whipped dog look when she wi
draws from him, and they are the sadd
eyes I have ever seen. Then he'll go off
silence, pick up a paper, moon over it,
try to read a book, or turn on the T.V.
just go out on the front lawn and walk,
hands in his pockets, his head down. Moth
is so coarse, so crude, hard as nails, a
Daddy i just the opposite. To me, she is
monster, neither woman nor beast, but so
of both. "He swallows hard, silent for a m
ment, and one hand goes jerkily to his ey
rubs away a shimmer of quick tears.
sniffs, coughs, pretending he has a cold.
wish—I wish there was some way I cou
give that same love to my Father—that m
Mother has never given him. He needs th
so much, Star. He is so lonely, so much
a coward now, it makes my heart bleed f
him. I just can't look at him when he
like that. So I run out of the house. And,"
shrugs, "I always wind up here."

"You should not hate your Mother," I a
vise him, remembering as from worlds a
worlds away, my own parents and what th
meant to me. And I add dramatically: "Y
should love and respect her, no matter wh
she has done, for she IS your mother."

"I will not love nor respect anyone, n

even Mother, who has caused the unhappiness of someone I love," he says painfully and, realizing what he has said, he turns a tearful face to mine. "Don't hate me for what I say, for what I think about her, Star. You do not know her as I. You will never know her kind. She has destroyed Daddy, and is trying to destroy my kid sister, but she will never destroy me!"

"But she is destroying you already," I assure him, though earnestly trying not to anger him, to pit myself as their ally, his natural enemy. I want to be on his side, want his respect for my intemperance to his wishes. "In hating you destroy. And hating can destroy you as well as the ones you hate. You hurt yourself by hating your mother. Hating is like drinking. You do it out of rebellion, fighting back at the world for your own unhappiness that the world has inflicted upon you, a world you begin to feel you neither need nor want, but we need these things, the love and respect of others, and our own respect for those in return. We must respect in order to be espected."

He tuns away quickly, as if he is angry, or trying to be angry with me for what I have said, and in this moment of reprieve it seemes that the whole lounge, for the music has stopped playing, waits—waits in- e justable, impalpable for his next move. "You talk as if it is all my fault that

Mother is the way she is," he says lo
dreamily, without rebellion, without reta
tion. "She was like that before I was b
Daddy has lived in hell the day he marr
her!"

I can tell he is deeply, profoundly pre
diced. Perhaps he has his reasons. I try
other angle.

"Do you and your Mother get along?"
ask, and I tone my words so that I can p
posely flay his decision, or hope to deflay
underplaying the words which should
naturally emphasized.

"Let us say we tolerate each other,"
says bluntly. His face takes on a tsran
triumph, as if he had lost a battle but h
won it again. "Oh—she loves me, I gue
It's not that really. They both love me
know, and that's what makes it so bad.
feel smothered. I wish she hated me t
way I hate her." He gulps at his bottle
beer, as if to wash back into his mou
what he has just said. "I don't want h
love, though, not anymore. For I know s
will never change. But I do wish she wou
go to Daddy, tell him how sorry she is f
the way she has treated him all these yea
He would take her back. He would get
his knees to her. But she won't ever go
him—no never, and he will continue t
unhappy all his life, so things at home w
never get any better. If anything, they'll g

worse."

"And your father and you—you are very close I suppose," I say humbly, but ridiculing in a subtale way. I realize that if I am to know this kid fully then I must not crack open his shell. I must give him the nutcracker and let him do it for me.

"Not close—not really close," he cries, and the sound of his low voice, so deeply southern, has a sad wail to it.as if he regrets their kind of relation. " Ithink he knows that I understand him—about him and Mother, I mean. But we never sit down and discuss our unhappiness. We just go on day after day putting it off, and we have put it off so long now that I amafraid it is impossible for us to ever get together—to sit down like two men and talk as men talk." He glances at me and smiles a faint smile. "Like you and me. I can talk to you, Star, for you understand me. But I knowDaddy does not understand me, nor I him. I love him, and he loves me, but Mother is the wide-wide chasm of space which keeps us apart. Because she is incapable of loving herself, she hates it in others. And I think she lives in fear that Daddy and I will gang up on her and throw her out. Even my sister would come to Daddy's and my side if Mother would only let her. But she is afraid, deathly afraid!" He stares at his beer as if it is a crystal ball. "I think—I know that is why

she turns to boys so much, does things w
them she wouldn't do otherwise." He laug
bitterly. His voice is like a dying Goo

"We're a crazy family, Star, real fruity

"So you finally made your trick!" com
a high falsetto voice from my rear, and
swing in my seat to find Gaston standi
over me, his face mockingly, lit up wi
that, "I told you so," expression, his pa
almost colorless eyes like diamonds dipp
in ice. "I knew you were a never-giver-upp
the first night I first saw you. Has it be
worth waiting for?"

"You see what I mean," Rowdy scow
ravenously, giving Gaston a dirty loo
"Fruity!"

"Oh, now who's calling the kettle black
Gaston cries gaily, flinging up one arm
deliberate burlesque, loving the offense a
not daring to allow himself the benefit
anger. It is the gay person's creed, to insu
and to take insult and yet maintain the
austerity which they consider charm. "Ho
are you two gorgeous butch numbers t
night? Me," he does not wait for an answe
"me, I'm famished. Hettie here (Mr. Be
erly tsicks his snow white head from arou
Gaston) has run my gay legs off all ev
ning doing some shopping with her — a
what do you imagine he's been shopping f
— a statue of Apollo Belvedere — can y
fathom that—a crummy old statue. A

she's so tight she won't buy me a decent meal—so tight you can hear her girdle squeak when she walks, so I—so we—,"

"Came down to the Black Lamp to get a free meal," I interrupt, one eyebrow turned purposely high.

"I notice you didn't turn your free plate down," he spits, his eyes goggle like, glittering offensively, both hands up in the air, spread wide, his cigarette in is long holder making thin blue curlecues above Rowdy's and my head. Rowdy eyes me curiously, with that cat at a mouse hole gaze, and looks all the more like a spirited elf. He is halfway enjoying the conversation, now that he has my protection as a shield against their advances. He can be within the ring of attraction, yet not its center, which I know he prefers. To be pursued by anyone can be a fascinating, an intoxicating thing. Especially when you do not have to surrender to the pursuers, and this was my namby-pambyism with Gaston and Mr. Beverly. They knew I was one of the untouchables who frequents this bar, and that I abhor their mush, so they feel free to fraternnize as far as they pelase.

"Don't mind Mabel here," Mr. Beverly apologizes, coming round to my side of the bar and ordering a round of drinks for us all. "She's been in a dither ever since we took that sailor from the destroyer in the

harbor riding this afternoon. There's
holding back for this bitch when she
ants in her pants—or should I say sailor
her pants, my dear. Scared that poor bu
number right out of the car, the way
was carrying on. It's just not my tact
Star. I asy at least hello to them bef
asking to unzip their zippers, but this
starved whore was trying to unbutton th
thirteen buttons of bliss on his darling sa
suit before he could get into my car. Sh
be having orgasms in St. Joseph's next!"

"Just proves how popular your sister
Gaston shrieks, flipping her wrist." Y
have to take it where you find it. If
don't take it then you lose it, for you'll ne
get another chance. Believe me, this
isn't going to throw one back in, once I
caught him. They just don't get by me
nooooo-sir-reeeee!" She lets out a girl
squeal, turns her body from side to side, l
wild eyes cassng the lounge, her express
haughty, sensual. Then, as instantaneous
she attains this stance she (he now) lo
it, becomes perceptively aware of his
tions, his mannerisms, as if he has spi
someone.

"Oh, to hell with it all!" he cries, and
the first time since I have known him, l
voice is masculine, without a trace of f
setto.

"She's seen her lover," Mr. Beverly sa

mockingly, smacking his thin pink lips, whcih are like a straight gash across his face, as if he wishes their separation. "And he hates bitchy faggots worse than a sucker hates the lockjaw. That's why she's behaving herself now."

"Oh, don't shake your ear-rings at me," Gaston blurts out, waving him to silence. "I know he hates nellies!" He squares his shoulders. "So what? I can be as butch as any of these silly queens!"

"Your best at being a faggot, my dear," Mr. Beverly advises, and with a pinch of acid. "So stick to your brassiere straps." He moves from where he is standing and takes Gaston by the arm. "We'll see you, Star," he mimics. "That sailor has come back for more!"

Gaston turns like a harridan and shakes a long polished finger at me. But his face rips with a smile. "I'm keeping my eye on you, Star, and if you so much as touch this gorgeous number I'm gonna call the vice squad." They prance off and into the crowd, wave to this one and that, their arms thrust like dead limbs of trees, weighted by the beer bottles they hold daintily, the bottles swaying to and fro like bright, gilded ornaments on a Christmas tree.

"You have to put up with them," I explain to Rowdy, turning back to face the bar. "That is—if you come in here. It's one

of Truly's explicit rules—put up with the
or get out."

"You don't have to explain," Rowdy whi
pers, his eyes brilliant on mine, as shar
as scimitars. "They bug me like that som
times too. I just ignore them—like a whi
ago. If you don't say anything to them they'
just leave." His eyes are serious now, har
ly more than dark slits in his searchin
face. "Does Truly like that kind?"

I nod my head. "It's all for the mone
The gay's are big spenders, and they brin
in additional trade. It's his occupation,
part of his business, to serve, so he serve
anyone who comes in here, regardles wha
they are. But I don't think he like them
not actually. They grow on you—he told m
once."

"I don't think I could put up with then
not regularly," he syas with a jeer. "Mayb
if they were more masculine. Could you pu
up with them—associate with them
mean?"

"When you are lonely you can put up wit
a lot of things," I explain. I take a swig o
the cold beer. "But not men like Gaston an
Mr. Beverly. I abhore anything false, bla
phemous, hypocritical, and they must be a
these things. How can men like them su
vive in this damning society without bein
false, several personalities at once."

"But—if they were more masculine?"

I shake my head, puzzled. "I don't know, Rowdy. I will not say I won't. I'll just say I never have. I have seen young men that are nicely formed, handsome, and I have had warm friendships with them, but to go beyond this—to share my body—to share intimate confidence — no — I — just don't know."

I ignore his steady gaze, swallow hard, take a quick puff off my cigarette, and swing momentarily in my seat to take note of the wild proceedings which have brought the crowd to bay. And I see Myrna, the most beautiful girl I have ever seen come into this bar, standing but a yard from me, her emerald eyes bewitchingly on me, and instinctively, I nudge Rowdy in the ribs and cry sardonically: "Here's more to my liking. Boy—take a look at her."

Recklessly, Rowdy swings in his seat and stares at her who now moves quickly toward us.

"I see what you mean," he gasps, smiling wickedly. One eyebrow goes up which lends to his features a dashing, debonair air.

Myrna is between us now and, pressing her body to mine, her breasts like pink balloons against my arm, she reaches over and nibbles my ear.

"How's my sex-baby tonight?" she coos, her libidinous hair, one of the most maddening things about her, falling in golden cas-

cading waves down one side of her face. is like Helen, leaning over the wall of T searching for Paris.

"Wonderful, now that you're here," answer, and rising, I put my arms aro her and pull her close, savoring her radiant flesh. She smells like someth from the Arabian nights. I sniff obviou thrusting my nose, stub-like, into the air

"I'm wearing My Sin tonight," she utt preening the coral pink beads around neck which makes several loops and dr to her navel by an enormous pendant. emerald eyes overflow with sex. "I wearing Balenciaga that night you took to your apartment—remember?" She tu a cautious gaze toward Rowdy, as if overheard. He has. He laughs softly, but dark eyes are shot with pain.

"How could I forget," I whisper rev ently, too reverently I think t those hear, for I am imbued by the memory it. She had insisted on bathing her n body with an assortment of colognes she brought along in her purse before would let me screw her, and the raptur aroma of her had remained in the bedro for days afterwards. Thinking of it now, every fiber sharpened by the animalism it, my loins shudder. I ache in every str o fme, though that night has become a t versty in my everyday existence, a paro

as it has become with every girl I have ever had. Love i sone thing, sex entirely another, and sex without love is like the thought of wonderful food you have eaten. You must have it again to really know what it is like.

"Myrna, this is Rowdy, a little friend of mine," I introduce them, herding my mind in a futile effort away from thoughts of her luscious body. She turns her face to him for but a moment, smiles, nodding slightly so that her pink coral ear-rings dance, then abruptly back to me. Rowdy bows like the young prine in Snow White.

"Star, do you like what I'm wearing?" she cries, pivoting her tiny slim body like a clothes model on a lighted dias. She is not seeking flattery. Myrna i snot that kind. She is aware that I am ever conscious about women's colthes and toward this effort she bends her aim in order to please me.

"Your breathtaking!" I mutter excitedly, taking her two hands and spreading her arms wide. She arches one leg directly in front of the other, twists one ankle, and drops one hip at least six inches.

She cocks her head to one side, nymph-like, the carriage lamp above us splashing her profile with molten gold, and she is like Undina engulfed from a sunset sea.

"I patronize two weird little shops on the

other side of the world," she says, co
tish. "One in Monte Carlo, and the othe
St. Tropez!" Then she laughs like a si
"Star—baby—I'm only kidding. "They c
from Shoppers Fair!"

"Hardly!" Rowdy implores, with ske
cism, and I nod my head, agreeing. She
attired in black satin Tally-Ho Capris,
bodice made like a vest, and slashed to
waist, cut so that her whole back and sh
ders are bare, and the entirety of this
slimmed, as is her torso, by extremely hi
heeled boots cuffed with black fur. Rou
enormous coral pink bracelets imprison h
wrists, matching in tone and texture h
beads and ear-rings, and their glimm
against the black satin makes her skin glo
She is beautiful in that way that mak
every man desire her.

I squeeze her hand, pull her closer to m

"Star! Don't put me on — please!" sh
cries, laughing as she always does when s
is trying to be serious. "I've got to go. Iv
the girl I work with, is over there in th
courtyard waiting for me."

"I'll never let you go!" I say, demanding
running my hand through her hair. My min
lashes out at another time, another place
another world. I let my fingers threa
through the luscious strands as if they were
silk. I look hungrily at her. That loneliness
which has become my keeper leaps at her.
austere, crucial, grievous. Numbly I come

back to reality. I drop my hand. Her shadowy eyes on mine are convulsive, tremulen . They burn through me, to my loins, as if I have swallowed a torch.

"Please—I've got to go," she says with a sigh, her smile painful, as if she is pleading with herself and not me. "I'll come back. Later—I'll come back."

I smile, then nod.

She moves away from me, walking backwards, bumping into the mob which forms a moving wall beyond the bar. Playfully, I grab her by the forearm, play out her arm as she continues to move, her wrist, gripping it for an instant before I let her go. She merges into the darkness, through the mass of human flesh, disappears beyond the flaying of arms, the agitating bodies.

"You've slept with her," Rowdy whispers, and he suck sas his beer bottle amorously, as if it were a tit. "Don't blame you — she's a nice trick, purtiest girl in this bar."

"I'll vote on that," I answer, saluting him with a hearty smile. "She's a good screw, the best (he flinches)—yes, I can truthfully say—the best I've ever had. Hot as tobasco sauce in August."

He laughs. His eyebrows are like startled wings over his long, dusky, lashed eyes — eyes which have in their steady glimmer a tiny gold light which i sfathomless, bottomless. "By the way," and he laughs again.

"I wear nothing but English Heather!" I
his point. I laugh back. "Nothing but
Greek Horseman for me," I add, triun
antly.

"She's real gone on that perfume.
minds me of a book I once read—The
male." He blushes. "Tells all about th
women of pleasure, the rituals they
through to prepare themselves for the
they entertain." His voice drags, utt
serious now. His eyes purposely evade m
"Do women really love sex that much?

"They're not much different from
when it comes to that," I assure him. "O
through sex and childbirth can they tr
fulfill their role as a woman. A man i
man whether he loves or not. But this
not so with a woman. She must give hers
to a man before she becomes a wom
What woman is not glad and glorified
be made sister of the silken narcissus,
delicate anemone—to be desired? A woma
greatest career is love, and the crown
her career is a child. But a man is not li
this." I look at him, gauge his attention. "
man's genius is egocentric—a woman's a
truistic, sacrificial. Whatever a woman is
life, a secretary, a cook, a dancer, a stri
per, or a prostitute—her one real functio
is in intecourse with men. If she misse
this, then she has mised everything!"

He hrugs. The juke-box is playing some

thing about, "Boondocks" and he taps his fingers against the bar in time to the catchy rythme. "I never thought about it like that," he says. "But I know you're right. It seems natural enough, women made for men's pleasure." His eyebrows twist and throw his expression out of shape. "But what about Lesbians—who like only women?"

He catches me off guard. There is so little I actually know about these weird mannish-women.

"An unfulfilled life," I say at last, summoning my only remnants of knowledge. "To us unfulfilled ,but to them—maybe—a full life. What is one man's meat is another man's poison. If they like one another, they are fulfilling something in that relation, but at the same time, I think, they are casting a hundred treasure troves into the gutter. Nothing is more overwhelming than the love of man, the passion of man, and a Lesbian sacrifices so much in denying herself this dominating ecstasy, and more still when she denies herself a child from that same man's love—his body. No other Lesbian can give her this, not even the fundamentals of it. So—they both are robbed!"

I ask for more drinks and as I wait for my change, I case the lounge. I see a number of girls crouched around a table in the darkest alcove of the courtyard, and I point them out to Rowdy.

"Hungry looking—aren't they?" I su
to him, taking in their cold, ice-clear
their hair, which is groomed like tee
boys, their clothes, which resemble s
thing out of David Copperfield.

"Are they Lesbians?" He asks excit
standing, with both hands on my shoul
and peering curiously at them.

"In the flesh!" I answer, acutely a
o fhis nearness, his pure physical pres
which is a mock synonym to everything
clean ni this lounge. He is like the Godl
on a ship of slaves. Turning back to loo
him over my shoulder, amused by his
pression, his mouth a round O, I see T
watching us. His eyes, too, are like
crystal clear, even in this smoke fi
room, and their glare is frightening. T
stab at me through the screen of toba
trails. I swallow hard. A lump rises in
throat. Rowdy still clings to my shoul
like the parrot in Treasure Island. He i
unconsciously aware of his immediate
roundings as a fairy in a garden on
borders of Elfdom.

I look at him, at his mouth, sad face,
I realize how violently, how impossibly,
hates the world of this lounge he rightf
owns.

Like someone deprived, he reaches fo
bottle of Vodka. Then a tall mug-type gl
"That did it!" he exclaims, turning o
longingly at me.

Madly, he squirts seltzer water, fizzing into the glass, and in that same instance he glares hysterically at the group of giddy young men lined along the bar directly in front of him, and he puts them down with:

"Douche time—girls!'

They giggle fanatically.

"Having a good time, Star," he comes at me, sarcastically, the glass poised before his lips. Not waiting for my answer, he swigs down the drink. It pours out on each side of the glass, runs down his face, off the end of his chin. Quickly, he fixes another. This he drinks more slowly. His eyes bulge. His blond head is thrust back ungracefully and, with the glass still between his lips, he wipes the sweat fro mhis forehead.

"I said — are you having a good time — STAR?" he half shouts, underscoring the word Star. His eyes cut me like sharp knives.

"Wonderful," I answer directly, and attempt a smile. "Your plate of shrimp was delicious. Regular Antione special."

He looms darkly opposite from me now. He cuts a hurting look at Rowdy, who recoils from my shoulders like a slaughtered phython and sits down on his stool.

"I always serve the best to my customers," he cries, and again his voice is edged on mockery. "I see you two are hitting it

off nicely. That's what I like—see ever body pair off!"

Rowdy squirms ni his seat, embarrasse He stares at his beer bottle, his empt plate. "Thanks fo the free food," he whi pers in a kuavery voice. "Makes the Fourt really the Fourth of July—a eal Indepe dence Day."

Truly turns his head purposely, I can tel giving Rowdy the impression he hasn heard. His manner is belligerent.

But he answers him, and tactfully.

"Gonna fatten you up, boy, for Star here He wants you to pose for him — naked!" His eyes narrow to slits, and his underjaw sets firm. He mixes another drink.

Rowdy's face flushes to crimson. It's in nocent mask cuts at me through the golde darkness. I feel the strong nausea of ridi cule, something of damnation which is di rected at me, though of which I have no part. Reaching into my pocket I take out a quarter and hand it to Rowdy. "Would you play the records? I want to talk to Truly for a moment?" He takes the quarter re luctantly.

Still embarrassed, Rowdy fumbles with his words. "Do you care if I pla—eh, what do you want to hear, Star?"

"That candy number, and anything else you like," I am quick to reply. He dis- appears through the communion of flesh

which hangs over the bar.

"You had no business saying that," I turn to Truly, a little taken back by his assumptions. "You make it sound queer!"

He drops his eyes, fumbles with his empty glass. "Maybe it is!" he comes back harshly, but his voice dies in a gutteural whisper.

"You know damn well it's not," I throw back at him. "Rowdy's just a nice kid — that's all — a nice kid."

"They're all nice," he grunts, sticking out his lower lip, which he licks with his tongue. "Nice little shity ass brats—punks! All of them goddamn punks!" He says this last extremely fast.

"Not Rowdy!" I half-shout, and I am unwary of who might hear. I could never endure anyone running roughshod over the young or the weak. "I wouldn't give the sweat off his balls for every punk in here."

He glares at me insanely. Like a volcano, the truth is rumbling to the surface. What I have said has punctured him to the deepest recesses, and he cannot fortify himself for another blow. He all but cows under my steady eyes.

"Lay off, Star," he cries, bending over his empty glass. "Can't take no more. I've had it tonight!"

He gropes down the aisle between the bar and the mirror, snatches up the bottle of

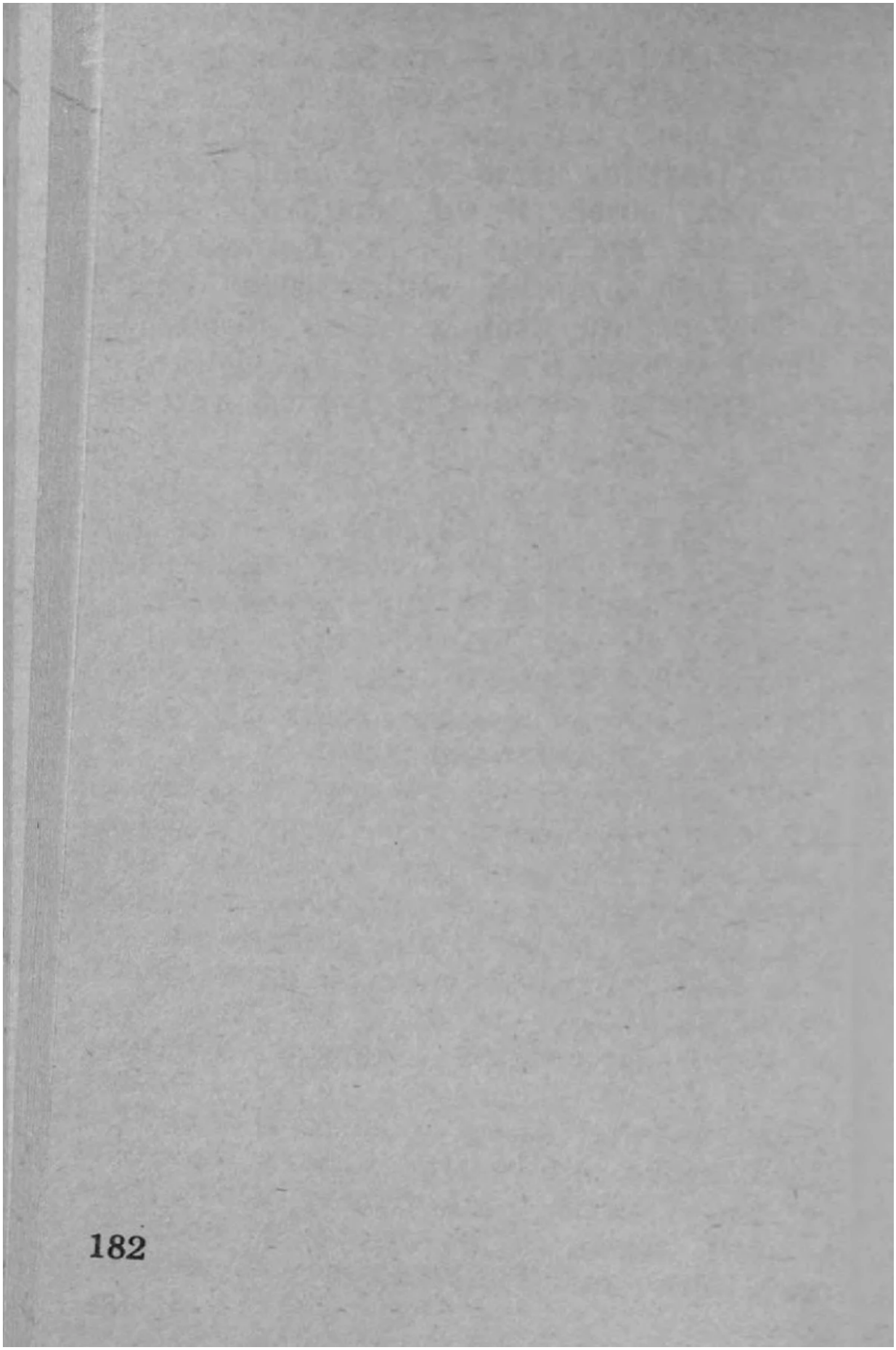
Vodka, slushes it into his glass and gulps it down. "Candy," begins to blare through the crowds who, caught up in the feverish tide of its wild cadence, roll and sway, pivot, tremble.

Rowdy returns to the bar. "I played it three times," he says, thinking he is doing me a favor. He searches out Truly. "Looks like he's gonna put one on tonight."

I agree with him. Yet I am concerned for Truly. I have never seen him this way. He drank, yes, but only socially, never privately as he is drinking now, exiling himself from the crowds, the bar, the madness of the moment. He and the drink alone are in a tussle, and I know he has sought this moment out, that, through some bitter, but very real circumstances, he has been driven to this. I watch him intently. He is surrounded by the people he knows, long before he knew me no doubt, yet he is alone, alon though he has searched them out on purpose, needfully. He is laughing raucously. His flushed face is deadly marked by the Vodka, and his eyes have that look of one who is in the state of grief, that brief insensitive moment before the tears will come.

Though I strongly sense Rowdy's physical nearness, a sense within me which has always been predominate when I am with someone, a throwback no doubt from my cravings to be alone, I am still aware

somehow of Truly. Like a parent who loves dearly one child who is present but who, mercifully, loves that one a hundred fold more who is astray some where amid peril, so I am torn between Rowdy and Truly. But Rowdy is safe, and Truly at the moment is upon that high sea with neither island nor shore. That he will float to safety, through this limbo, through this flotsom and jetsom of this Jezebelian world—this I must watch and see.



CHAPTER SIX

The world of the strange is gripping him, sprinkling him with the poison of poppy seeds, and his presence somehow, his nearness, that he and I are enjoying ourselves, is tearing something loose in Truly's mind. He throws the bar cloth against the counter as if he hopes it is fragile glass and will shatter into smitherines. He turns like a wild animal and glares at the long rows of whiskey bottles which line the shelves. He gazes at them for an instant as if he is stranded upon a desert...as if his tongue is parched and they are flagons of cool water. I have seen men gazing in desperation at women in the same manner. At that moment, I know what I must do.

Fondly, even reverently, I gaze around at all of thenow familiar surroundings and faces. I have become a part of this place and these people. While I cannot condone or agree with their ways and the lives that they have chosen, I have always respected their right to live the life that they desired. I have never felt that they were really happy or content but this was their life and they alone must bear their own cross.

My mind has been made up. My decision has been reached. I must leave this place at once. No goodbyes...no scenes...no farewells. I must walk out of the door, not turn back and keep right on going. It must be a clean break so that all of the tender and heart-warming thoughts will always remain embedded in my brain and in my heart.

I turn to Rowdy and intrude upon his reverie by tapping him upon his shoulder. He turns to me, startled, and his face lights up with anticipation as though he is expecting a command to perform some great and heroic deed. I can see the obvious look of adoration on his youthful countenance and it fills me with remorse for I know that it will break his heart when I leave.

"Rowdy, I am leaving this place," I speak in a soft and easy manner.

He smiles his boyish grin and says, "I'm ready whenever you are."

I realize that he doesn't fully realize the meaning of my statement and that I shall have to be more specific and arrange for a brief and un-

compromising farewell.

"Rowdy, I want you to listen to me carefully and understand what I am trying to tell you. I am leaving here for good. I don't know where I am going or how long it will be before I come back, if ever."

His eyes open wide and I see the moisture begin to form on his eyeballs which will soon turn to tears. His hands clench and his face begins to pale. I must continue quickly so that he will have time to control himself and keep a check on his emotions which are getting ready to reach a point of no recall. He deserves kindness and gentleness, for that is the kind of person he is and it would hurt me if I hurt him. Truly is stronger and is able to vent his emotions physically to relieve his torments and tensions in that manner. He will be hurt but will have the strength to weather it and to prove to himself that he is man enough to withstand a loss that will hurt him deeply and create a resentment toward any future close alliance with another human being.

I continue, ever mindful to refrain from hurting this youth.

"I must go way. I have the strength to face any crisis but I do not like being involved in situations that can lead to hurt and pain for people I care about. I must leave this place and it must be done at once. There can be no recriminations nor postponed decisions. The die must be cast without any further ado. This will be goodbye for us, too. Try to understand that I have no

choice. We know each other only a short time but we have become vevy close. You once asked if we could be friends. I want you to know that I consider you one of my very dearest friends and that I shall never forget you. And now..."

"Wait, Star," he said tremulously, the faint hint of tears in his eyes. "If you are going to leave here, why can't I go with you? You will need someone to help look after you. You will need a companion. I think that we both know the meaning of loneliness, the hurt and the pain. I have no ties to keep me here, only hate and degradation. Unless you don't want me, can you give me one good reason why I cann't go with you? I am able to work and take care of myself and still help to look after you. Please don't take offense at what I am saying or misinterpret my words but I don't think that I could go on without you. You have given me a new lease on life and it isn't fair to snatch it away so quickly. You have made a quick decision in regard to leaving...well, I have also made my decision. I must go with you. Please don't leave me, I beg of you. I plead to your compassion and to whatever feelings you have toward me. Let me go with you and maybe together, we can find happiness."

I listened to him speak and give vent to his innermost emotions. I realized how difficult it was for him to express his feelings so openly and in such a blatant manner. As he spoke, I was listening and weighing his words. I knew that I did

not have the time for a prolonged decision. I must think fast, and yet, my decision will be a momentous one which will affect all of our lives. If I choose wrongly, there is no telling what consequences will result. I turn my head and look over at Truly. He is engaged in a heated discussion with one of his ill-regarded patrons. He is venting his frustrations and anger on this poor misguided soul. Yes, Truly will be hurt, but he is all man and he will be able to have the strength to carry on.

I turn back to my dear friend Rowdy and the anxiety in his face helps me to make my decision. I know that I cannot leave here in good conscience knowing that I have left him behind to face the world that he cannot cope with alone. I feel needed...yes, for the first time a such a very long time, I know that there is someone who needs me. Someone that can give me some justification for my existence in this crazy, mixed-up world that we live in. Perhaps, through this young misguided boy, I can find that which I seek. It may be something that will be everlasting or it may be only for a brief period. Either way, it is something that I must go through with to find out. If I walk out of this door alone, there will be doubts and recriminations wherever I go and whatever I do.

I reach over and place my arm around his shoulder.

"Come, my little friend, let us get our things to-

gether and be on our way. I don't know what lies ahead for us or how things will work out but we will try it and face the future together. We will give each other comfort and friendship."

With a quick and soulful backward glance at Truly, we turn and walk out of the Black Lamp. Farewell for now...perhaps we shall return.

THE END?

